A Hand Out in the Dark: Rethinking the Human in Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Nine Lives”

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A Hand Out in the Dark:
Rethinking the Human in Ursula K. Le Guin’s “Nine Lives”

In her 1983 commencement address at Mill’s College, Ursula K. Le Guin eschewed the expected inspirational messages telling graduates to fight and win at life. Instead, she mused, “Maybe we’ve had enough words of power and talk about the battle of life. Maybe we need some words of weakness” (“Left-handed Commencement” 115). Her 1969 story, “Nine Lives,” exemplifies the act of speaking “words of weakness” to “words of power” by questioning the patriarchal discourses that seek to reduce human experience to the metaphor of a battle between the weak and the strong. The novelette is ostensibly a tale about the ethical and existential ambiguities of human cloning, but through it Le Guin probes the colonialist rhetoric and vilification of the feminine latent in narratives of technological advancement in science fiction. Through her exploration of the binary themes of bodily perfection/imperfection, sameness/difference, and blindness/vision, she explores the dark country of human experience in its entirety, celebrating those aspects of the life experience associated with women that have been given malicious treatment in literature: fertility, gestation, childbirth, illness, menopause, and aging. Through its contrasts between flawless clones and ordinary human beings, “Nine Lives” makes a speculative examination of the cost of pursuing a socially privileged conception of perfection.

As a prolific author of fantasy and speculative fiction, Le Guin has contributed significantly to the movement to challenge the colonizing mentality of the beloved members of the Science Fiction genre. She remarked in 1985, “I part company with a whole variety of science fiction, the imperialistic kind, as seen in all the Space Wars and
Star Wars novels and films….in such fictions, space and the future are synonymous: they are a place we are going to get to, invade, colonize, exploit, and suburbanize” (“Science Fiction and the Future” 143). Unlike the majority of her speculative fiction, which explores primarily the philosophical and metaphysical ramifications of the common tropes in the genre rather than the pure science of imagined futures, “Nine Lives” contains perhaps the most “hard” science in her entire body of work. In it, the science of human cloning and space exploration receive a feminist examination, confronting the destructive paradoxes of scientific exploration and technological advancement.

The setting of “Nine Lives” is the distant, untamed, and hostile frontier of space, formidable and vulnerable at the same time. The planet Libra, where the two scientists Alvaro Guillen Martin and Owen Pugh are stationed as part of an extraterrestrial mining operation, is vividly corporeal and emphatically female in its personification. She is “alive inside but dead outside” (Le Guin, “Nine Lives” 29). Notably, Libra reflects the stage of a woman’s life that has received the most patriarchal hostility in literature: aging. Libra’s corporeality is diseased and dying, and Le Guin pulls no punches in detailing the changes that time wreaks on a woman’s body. Libra is “bald and blind,” and her surface is “a black and dun net of wrinkles, tumors, cracks” (29); her subterranean features containing precious uranium are “a cow’s bowel. A bloody great constipated intestine” (37); her volcanos are “a boil…spewing silver pus across the sunset” (29). Her surface resembles “dun rugose skin” and is “leprotic” (35). With this gorgeously grotesque depiction of an aging female body, Le Guin draws attention to the fact that women’s lives encompass those parts of human experience that are ignored,
stigmatized, and repudiated. In her address to Mill’s College she points out this gendered dividing line between what is “strong” and “weak” in human experience: “Women have lived, and have been despised for living, the whole side of life that includes and takes responsibility for helplessness, weakness, and illness, for the irrational and the irreparable, for all that is obscure, passive, uncontrolled, animal, unclean—the valley of the shadow, the deep, the depths of life” (“Left-Handed” 116).

Through the femaleness of the decrepit planet Libra, Le Guin brings into relief the fear of the female inherent in the universal fear of the darker aspects of experience, the two poles of the life journey where we are weakest—the birthing bed and the death bed.

Through her re-appropriation of the myth of the monstrous woman, the harbinger of death and chaos, Le Guin confronts the gendered nature of the fear of death in the collective psyche and its appearance in patriarchal literature. The wicked, unpredictable, and hideous planet Libra harkens to all the evil females in literature that are a threat to civilization, virtue, and equilibrium. Feminist literary scholars Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar trace the manifestations of the female monster in male-authored literature, from Shakespeare’s Lady Macbeth to the female figure of Sin in Milton’s Paradise Lost: “Emblems of filthy materiality, committed only to their own ends, these women are accidents of nature, deformities meant to repel, but in their freakishness they possess unhealthy energies, powerful and dangerous arts” (29). Le Guin embraces this traditionally misogynistic figure, glorying in all of her intractable power, putting her in careful opposition to the technological advancements that have rendered space travel and extraterrestrial colonization within reach, with one last distant goal eluding the grasp of science—the power over life and death.
The stigmatization of the female role in the life/death cycle is inescapable in the scientific advancements that drive interstellar travel and commerce in “Nine Lives.” Departing from dystopian fiction that foresees human extinction through a loss of fertility, Le Guin foresees the possibility of the human race going extinct from fertility run amok—mass famine resulting from overpopulation. Le Guin’s main protagonists—the only two humans stationed on Libra—represent the last remnants of a struggling humanity, some of the few survivors to have emerged from a global holocaust of hunger. Entire nations and ethnicities have been wiped out, making the “human genetic pool…a mucky little puddle since the population crash” (“Nine Lives” 48). Women’s bodies (through hyper-fertility) threaten humanity with an overabundance of life. The reining in of rampant fertility saves the human race, but those who have survived bear the scars of generations of privation; they have been left fragile and damaged, in the process of dying: “Their sons were lean, their grandsons lean, small, brittle-boned, easily infected” (32). “Nine Lives” was published at the height of the debate about reproductive rights in the U.S. in the late 60’s and early 70’s, and the story is preoccupied with a fundamental obstacle to a woman’s ownership of her own body: the simultaneously elevated and degraded status of a woman’s role in the reproductive process. In the story, the present-day bogeyman of the liberated women with the power over life and death in her hands is mirrored in both the specter of the hyper-fertile female bringing near-extinction to the human race and in the unpredictable and antagonistically female frontier of space.

Unexpectedly for a narrative about space travel, the encounter with the alien being, perhaps the most frequent convention in Science Fiction, takes the form of an
encounter with genetically manipulated human beings from Earth, rather than beings of extraterrestrial origin: teams of ten or twelve identical human clones, all replicas of the same individual, are sent out “as regularly and blindly as a dandelion sends out its seed” (36) on extra-planetary missions. The “tenclone,” collectively named after the individual from which they were cloned, John Chow, consists of ten identical clones: five male and five female. Representatives of the Earth-based “Exploitation Corps” (32), the John(s) Chow arrive to extract the valuable uranium that Pugh and Martin have discovered on Libra. The genuineness of their humanity is suspect from the beginning. Martin experiences “technological shock” (30) when meeting ten identical humans, with identical voices and a frightening gestalt-intelligence. Their alien sameness triggers the “cognitive estrangement” that Darko Suvin, pioneer scholar of Science Fiction, argues is the hallmark of the genre: the visceral reaction to “a strange newness” (4). The clones’ similarity to what we know and expect produces the jarring effect when the true difference becomes clear. Suvin goes on to explain the effect of the trope of the encounter with the alien being: “The aliens—utopians, monsters, or simply differing strangers—are a mirror to man just as the differing country is a mirror for his world. But the mirror is not only a reflecting one, it is also a transforming one, virgin womb and alchemical dynamo: the mirror is a crucible” (5). The characterization of the alien world of the future as a “virgin womb” is particularly applicable in the case of “Nine Lives,” with the ten artificially perfect human clones representing both the novel nature of cloning technology and the motivation behind the act of cloning itself: the achievement of an immaculate conception for the human race. The ten intelligent, coordinated, and physically perfect clones represent the possible circumvention of the birth-death cycle,
which is made possible by controlling, regulating, and monetizing the role of the female in human reproduction.

In “Nine Lives,” human cloning effectively renders human reproduction a compartmentalized and outsourceable system, virtually eliminating the female from the process. Called the “Exploitation Corps,” ostensibly because of their mission to extract mineral wealth from newly discovered worlds, the “tenclone” John(s) Chow are the product of another more sinister kind of exploitation. Ideal human specimens are exploited—harvested—for their genetic material. The method of the clones’ reproduction amounts to a soulless manufacture of goods, avoiding all the messiness and chance that attends typical human procreation. “‘They’ve worked out these matters of technique and function very carefully. The taxpayer wants the best for his money,’” one of the clones explains dispassionately (34). Technology accomplishes the purging of the female from the fact of human reproduction: rather than being cloned from male and female reproductive cells, the clones are derived from a single individual’s intestinal cells because “they are easier to despecialize and reprogram” (34). The clones don’t, in the biological sense, have two parents; they are a single individual repeated ten times over. Thus, they can be reproduced without recourse to the female-centered “uncontrolled, animal, unclean” (Le Guin, “Left-Handed” 116) aspects of population growth—procreation, childbirth, and child-rearing. Instead, traditionally feminine roles are reengineered or totally replaced: the clones are gestated in artificial wombs—“the Ngama placentae”—and farmed out to trained “foster parent groups” (Le Guin, “Nine Lives” 34). In order for the cloning industry to function as a financially viable operation,
femininity is reduced to its basic social function and appropriated as needed, thus precluding the vulnerability and pathology of the female.

As alien beings—the more human than human products of the immaculate "virgin womb" of fragmented and commodified femininity—the clones serve to allegorize the subjugation and fragmentation of the human race into weak and strong gendered components through technology. The clones themselves are the product of a sanitized and masculinized version of human reproduction, and, although half the members are male, the clones themselves play unquestioningly feminine roles. Individualism is a quality primarily sanctioned in men, and the clones are effectively stripped of individuality. The clones are all named John Chow, being differentiated only by middle names that are not names at all, but Hebrew phonemes—Aleph, Kaph, Yod, Gimel, Samedh, Daleth, Zayin, Beth, and Resh—cyphers rather than words, sounds rather than meanings (32). As an ideal workforce, they are seemingly without identity outside of their predetermined function, just as women have historically been allowed little life or identity outside a sanctioned sphere. The clones are characterized by a traditionally feminine code of conduct: to cooperate, to efface self, to submit to the group mandate. This cooperation gives them a frightening efficiency, almost akin to mind-reading. “Given the same stimulus, the same problem, we’re likely to be coming up with the same reactions and solutions at the same time” they tell Pugh (33). Communication is almost unnecessary because in working together they never confront unfamiliar ideas or arguments, so they never disagree or fail to understand each other: “Explanations are easy—don’t even have to make them, usually. We seldom misunderstand each other. It does facilitate working together as a team” (33). Their total familiarity with each other
allows them to function as a hive-mind, resembling “a hive of golden bees” (34) and a “flock of starlings that change course in one wingflick” (34). With the anarchic principle of femininity bred out, the clones altogether seem barely human, merely the dehumanized worker bees of the exploitive system that created them.

The clear presence of the male gaze is apparent in the physical descriptions of the female members of the tenclone. The openly incestuous relationships between the clones and the presence of five sexually attractive female bodies, without the “defensiveness of self or awareness of others” (40) to conceal either their bodies or their liaisons, all contribute to a “constant emotional-sexual-mental interchange” (40) among the twelve humans on Libra. Yet, with all their sexual attractiveness, the female clones are only female versions of a male prototype. With the technological trickiness of “hook[ing] in Y chromosomes” (34) during the cloning procedure, usually only male specimens are cloned. The female clones’ sexuality is curtailed in a way it is not with the males; the male clones have the option to “interbreed with approved singletons, if they want to” (34), but the female clones are sterile—a fact to which they are blithely indifferent because of their total absorption in their own clone-group. Biologically, there is no need for the females at all, only a vestigial need to couple as males and females, because “clones function best bisexually” (34) as a work-team.

The sexualized depiction of the female clones contrasts sharply with the physically disadvantaged Owen Pugh, with his lack of strong masculine corporeality, demonstrating how the figure of the monstrous female has been, as Gilbert and Gubar observe, a “powerfully coercive and monitory image for women” (34), directly related to physical appearance, age, and health. Owen Pugh is physically weak, self-conscious of
his appearance, and lacking all of his parts. He is a “one-lunged short-sighted Welshman,” as he describes himself (Le Guin, “Nine Lives” 48). He feels particularly conscious of his physical unattractiveness, like “a plucked rooster, all white scrawn and pimples” (32). The clones, on the other hand, represent the best of humanity, veritable royalty; their facial features resembling “the nose of an Assyrian King, the eyes of a samurai, skin bronze, eyes the color of iron; young, magnificent” (29). Pugh’s unease about his own corporeality is reminiscent of Gilbert and Gubar’s identification of “the sexual nausea” (34) caused by depictions of the monstrous female in art. The dichotomizing of women into angel or monster, they explain, has influenced women’s self-image:

so many real women have for so long expressed loathing of (or at least anxiety about) their own, inexorable female bodies. The ‘killing’ of one’s self into an art object—the pruning and preening, the mirror madness, and concern with odors and aging, with hair that is invariably too curly or too lank, with bodies too thin or too thick—all this testifies to the efforts women have expended not just trying to be angels but trying not to become female monsters (34).

Pugh longs for what appears to be the unbroken wholeness of the clone group, “sufficient to itself physically, sexually, emotionally, intellectually” because of the “support and approval…of his other selves” (Le Guin, “Nine Lives” 38). In his deep awareness of his lack of male-infected strengths, Pugh exemplifies the principle that “women have seen themselves (because they have been seen) as monstrous, vile, degraded creatures, second-comers, and emblems of filthy materiality” (Gilbert and Gubar 240) in comparison with the “strengths” of male virtues.

Le Guin refuses, however, to tell another tale of the strong fighting and winning both “the battle of life” (Le Guin, “Left-Handed” 155) and the game of civilization-building. The monstrously female, immensely aged, eternally dying planet Libra, is a
place where the so-called “weak,” like Owen Pugh, have a greater chance for survival. Rather than playing the cautionary figure, intended to shame women for their corporeality, the planet Libra acts as an irrepressible force, akin to Suvin’s “crucible” (5): a testing ground for the patriarchal and colonialist virtues applauded in traditional Science Fiction. Libra’s name, in fact, is Latin for “balance,” and “Libra” is often depicted as a woman holding a balance scale (“Libra”). As both the source of the vital uranium that supports human life in far-flung settlements and the death-bringing unknowns of the frontiers of space, the planet Libra represents the life/death balance. The hostile forces at work beneath the dead surface of Libra balance the scales between the “weak” and the “strong,” upsetting the hierarchy created by tampering with the life/death balance. When the cave the clones have been excavating collapses in one of Libra’s frequent earthquakes, the male-coded strengths that are their advantage as an Exploitation Team—and their unthinking conformity—become a fatal weakness. The single survivor, Kaph, fails to signal for help when he and his partner-clone are injured. Pugh surmises that “he wasn’t in his senses. But even if he had been I don’t know that he’d have thought to signal us. They looked to one another for help” (44). The extreme interdependence that makes them efficient as a team is their downfall:

If this lot had been ten average inefficient E.T. engineers, would they have all got killed? What if, when the quake came and things started caving in, what if all those kids ran the same way, farther into the mine, maybe, to save one who was farther in?… But I keep thinking, out of ten ordinary and confused guys, more might have gotten out (50).

Stripped of an intuitive sense of their own vulnerability in the face of death, nine of the clones die an avoidable death, leaving only one member behind.
Everett Hamner, in his study of depictions of human cloning in Science Fiction, orients “Nine Lives” in the tradition of a spiritual coming-of-age tale, “a compressed bildungsroman” (69). Although a male member of the tenclone, Kaph, like his fellow clones, represents the neutralized and sterilized remains of the feminine: female qualities and functions cobbled together as convenient and desirable. The traits that would have made him an empathetic problem-solver are missing because they would also render him uncooperative, unpredictable, and anarchy-prone. With the death of the other clones, he is stripped of his identity as a group member and torn from the safe, unquestioning, unchallenging space of sameness. He is forced to embark upon a new life which he, like all human beings, must undertake utterly and completely alone. In her address to Mill’s College, Le Guin suggests that the darkness of truealoneness is a defining feature of humanity, both a destination and an origin-place:

Our roots are in the dark; the earth is our country. Why did we look up for a blessing?—instead of around, and down? What hope we have lies there. Not in the sky full of orbiting spy-eyes and weaponry, but in the earth we have looked down upon. Not from above, but from below. Not in the light that blinds, but in the dark that nourishes, where human beings grow human souls (“Left-handed” 117).

In order to “grow [a] human soul,” Kaph must rediscover the stunted and fragmented female aspects of his humanity, which had previously been denied him because of his technological immaculate conception.

Finding himself for the first time an isolated and autonomous being causes him tremendous existential vertigo akin to the disorientation women experience when venturing beyond traditional social strictures. Kaph’s journey serves as an allegory of the liberation from gendered allocations, and all the death pangs that go with it. He first undergoes a shattering awareness of the finiteness of his being in suffering through
nine deaths, metaphorically shedding nine defunct, sterile selves. With each dead self, he stops breathing only to revive again—one death for every member of his clone group. “I think he’s dying with them,” Pugh guesses after the first few death-convulsions; “they’re all dead. They were crushed or suffocated. They were all him, he is all of them. They died, and now he’s dying their deaths one by one” (46). Finding himself truly alone for the first time in his life, he experiences “the child’s dream: There is no one else in the world but me” (53). His awakening as a truly autonomous creature leaves him, in his own words, “nine-tenths dead” (47), but in reality he has been “born” into a new phase of life that begins with his first taste of loss and isolation. He thus experiences an allegorical rebirth into the stigmatized “weakness” of the singular individual, responsible for his own actions, culpable for his own errors, without the comfort of sameness and social approval that he possessed before.

Pugh, the literal geologist of Libra’s subterranean secrets and the metaphorical geologist of the changes occurring underneath Kaph’s “turned-off android” exterior (48), diagnoses Kaph with a metaphorical blindness that becomes apparent only when he awakens as an isolated human being: “He doesn’t see us or hear us, that’s the truth. He never had to see anyone else before. He never was alone before. He had himself to see, talk with, live with, nine other selves all his life” (48). Blindness, or defective vision, is a strand of imagery that is repeated again and again in “Nine Lives,” hinting that there are different kinds of “seeing” and that one kind of “seeing” is in fact blindness. “‘Your [face] is human to be sure,’” Pugh tells Martin before the arrival of the clones, “‘but I’ve seen it so long I can’t see it’” (29). To be surrounded by sameness is to be effectively blind. Later in the story, after the arrival of the clones, “Pugh slept and dreamed of a
one-eyed giant who chased him through the shaking halls of Hell” (31). The image of the cyclops is particularly loaded with connotation, alluding to the brutishness associated with singleness of vision: a bestial inability to see beyond one’s own needs and wants. We are reminded that Pugh at first marveled that to be part of the tenclone was “to be oneself ten times over” (31). But because they are insulated in a cocoon of privileged status with “nine seconds for every motion, nine ayes on every vote” (31), they lack a metaphorical second eye to see difference, and consequently are incapable of true love or self-sacrifice. In an altruistic act that mirrors the futile actions of the tenclone to rescue their counterparts, Pugh takes the “unnecessary risk” (52) of setting out in another massive earthquake to rescue a stranded Martin. Not until he witnesses this act does Kaph begin to fathom the concept of love for the first time. “‘Do you love Martin?’” Kaph asks Pugh (54), seemingly awakened to the idea of love for the first time. Kaph seems to “see” Owen Pugh as he had never “seen” anyone outside of his clone group: “He looked at the other man. His face was changed, as if he was glimpsing something he had not seen before” (55).

The true and most crucial way of “seeing,” the story suggests, requires the dark. The darkness that stems from the fear that accompanies an awareness of difference is the fertile ground where genuine human emotion can take root. The darkness of uncertainty about the Other, “the strangeness of the stranger” (30) is a primal feeling a human being never fully becomes accustomed to. Every human interaction raises the perennially unanswered question: “will he make a fool of me wreck my image of myself invade me destroy me change me?” (30). Yet this fear is intrinsic to being human, a fear associated with survival, “the primitive anxiety, the old dread” (31). And without this
darkness of uncertainty, genuine love is impossible. Pugh glosses love itself as “hold[ing] out your hand in the dark” (55). As a clone—insulated in his group—Kaph was immune to this fear because of his inability to see in the dark space between all human beings, to see Others and experience his own Otherness.

Analyzing depictions of alterity—otherness—in Le Guin’s fiction, theologian Elizabeth Anderson has observed the tendency in her storytelling to highlight not only the value but the necessity of difference. Anderson uses women’s studies researcher Abigail Bray’s definition of alterity to analyze its appearance in Le Guin’s fiction: “a form of Otherness … which exceeds colonizing logic of the self/other binary …. Altery signals … the space of difference” (183). The “space of difference” emphasized in “Nine Lives” is a space of strength, rather than the weakness that seems to be in contrast with the clones’ effortless and unquestioning unity. In contrast to the symmetrical homogeneity of the clones, human ethnicity and linguistic differences—difference within a social group—is foregrounded in the characterizations of Martin and Pugh. Martin is dark-skinned and speaks an Argentinian dialect of Spanish, while the pale-skinned Pugh intersperses his speech with Welsh. Their difference from each other—differences they are often unable to bridge, resulting in daily misunderstandings and disagreements—not only ensures their mutual survival on an inhospitable frontier, but creates the space for a friendship unlike that of the collection of unvarying selves to which Kaph formerly belonged.

Unlike many traditional spiritualities, which are founded on privileging the disembodied, ethereal, and pure above the physical, material, the sullied, Le Guin’s conception of the sacred as evoked in “Nine Lives,” encompasses the totality of human
experience: light and dark, clean and unclean. Because of the inextricability of the female with the corporeal in literature, women have found themselves excluded from “growing human souls” in their life journey. To counter this, Le Guin locates spirituality, not in a corporeal/non-corporeal hierarchy, but on a Self/Other balancing act—in the space between the Monstrous and the Beneficent, the Hideous and the Sublime. In seeking to attain a false spirituality by eliminating the corporeal (and the feminine) through science, the truly sacred is bred out, as is our capacity for finding meaning in love, faith, and sacrifice. By rooting Kaph’s discovery of the spiritual, not in the realization of an inferior corporeality, but in the realization of his aloneness, his singularity and isolation as a being, Le Guin disconnects the sacred from the disembodied and reimagines a spiritual consciousness deriving from the “space of difference” (Anderson 183) and the courageous acts that spring from extending ourselves into the unknown out of love, faith, and curiosity.

Such acts of venturing into the darkness—even the slightest ones—to reach another human being, Le Guin suggests, have a spiritual value. Social niceties like offering greetings—which Pugh likens, in Kaph’s case, to “tell[ing] yourself goodnight” (50)—are some of Kaph’s first learned behaviors. The moment that Kaph says “good night” to Pugh and Martin, without being prompted to do so, is his first defining act as a human. The narrator describes Kaph’s belated reply, which nobody hears, in religious terms: “repeating, across the darkness, benediction” (55). Later in her essay about Le Guin’s depictions of alterity, Anderson cites post-colonial theologian Mayra Rivera’s depiction of the God as the ultimate Other: “God is irreducibly Other, always beyond our grasp” (qtd. in Anderson 183). In “Nine Lives,” Le Guin suggests that the natural
extensions of love, spirituality, and faith, are also analogous to the act of “hold[ing] out your hand” to the metaphysical, the ultimate “strangeness of the stranger.” Diversity performs not only an evolutionary function but a spiritual function as well—it offers us the plurality of vision that allows us to envision worlds and states of being yet unknown to us.

A key function of Science Fiction, as Suvin argues, is to elucidate “future-bearing elements from the empirical environment” (7). Le Guin comments on the “future-bearing” potential of a cultural obsession with youth, beauty, and perfection, suggesting that the future of this obsession, paired with scientific advances that render such perfectibility possible, is a future of spiritual starvation. In Kaph’s case, his physical perfection and total assimilation into his clone group are obstacles to full humanity. In contrast, Pugh and Martin, with all of their physical weaknesses, personal flaws, disagreements, and misunderstandings, have the ability to love because of their capacity to be alone, to walk the in the dark dimensions of difference. Ordinary human frailty and our sense of incompleteness within ourselves, Le Guin reveals, predisposes us to social behavior, altruism, and love. On the other hand, she also outlines the dystopian potential of harnessing technology to seek a false spirituality by purging the earthly to attain the transcendent. By revealing how the weak and vulnerable moments of the life journey have both a pragmatic and an existential value that has been denied them in literature, particularly Science Fiction, Le Guin seeks to redeem the totality of human experience for its rightful celebration in art. Le Guin’s encourages all marginalized beings to reclaim and reinvent the stigmatized status enforced by norms of
gender, race, and age, because that which is stigmatized can become the most powerful thing of all, pregnant with the potential to create and to renew.
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