La pensée férale

Visual Ethnography

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Abstract: Feral are those animals that, having been domesticated, return to live in wildness. Brazilian Philosopher Juliana Fausto uses this biological concept to reinterpret Levi Strauss' la Pensée Savage. In this famous book the french anthropologist proposed the possibility of a mind still untamed by western civilization. Fausto imagines one step further, questioning what would our thought become if we ever break the chains of domestication, liberate and decolonize our minds: It won't be a savage thought, but may become a feral thought...La Pensée Férale is fruit of Steegmann Mangrané's ongoing dialogue with the Brazilian philosopher, a work that blurs the division between animal and vegetal, object and subject, rendering uncanny images whose gaze interpellate us and reinforce that nature is not without sentience or feeling.

Bios:
Juliana Fausto is a writer and philosopher. She graduated in Philosophy from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, completed a Master's degree in Literature at PUC-Rio and a PhD in Philosophy at the same university. She was a postdoctoral researcher at the Federal University of Paraná. She is a researcher at species – Speculative Anthropology Nucleus and at Inuma – Human Non-Human Interfaces/UFS. She writes and speaks before and with extrahumans and dissidents of the cisheteropatriarchy in a myriad of contexts. She lives in Rio de Janeiro with Bruxo, Batatinha, Nausicaa, where she also works as a translator.

Daniel Steegmann Mangrané was born in Barcelona in 1977 and since 2004 lives in Rio de Janeiro. His research is particularly interested in biological processes and anthropological discourses, which he uses as inspiration to create works that confuse the traditional separations between culture and nature, subjects and objects, reality and dreams, visible and invisible, or corporeal and incorporeal ... dissolving them into relationships of mutual transformation.His works are found in the permanent collections of the Tate Modern, MAM Rio de Janeiro, Inhotim, Serralves, Kiasma, Walker Art Center, MACBA, Collection Pinault, Hamburger Banhoff or Castello de Rivoli, among others.

Keywords: Feral Animals, feral thought, visible/invisible.

La pensée férale: introduction

Feral are those animals that, having been domesticated, return to live in wildness. Brazilian Philosopher Juliana Fausto uses this biological concept to reinterpret Levi Strauss' la Pensée Savage. In this famous book the french anthropologist proposed the possibility of a mind still untamed by western civilization. Fausto imagines one step further, questioning what would our thought become if we ever break the chains of domestication, liberate and decolonize our minds: It won't be a savage thought, but may become a feral thought...

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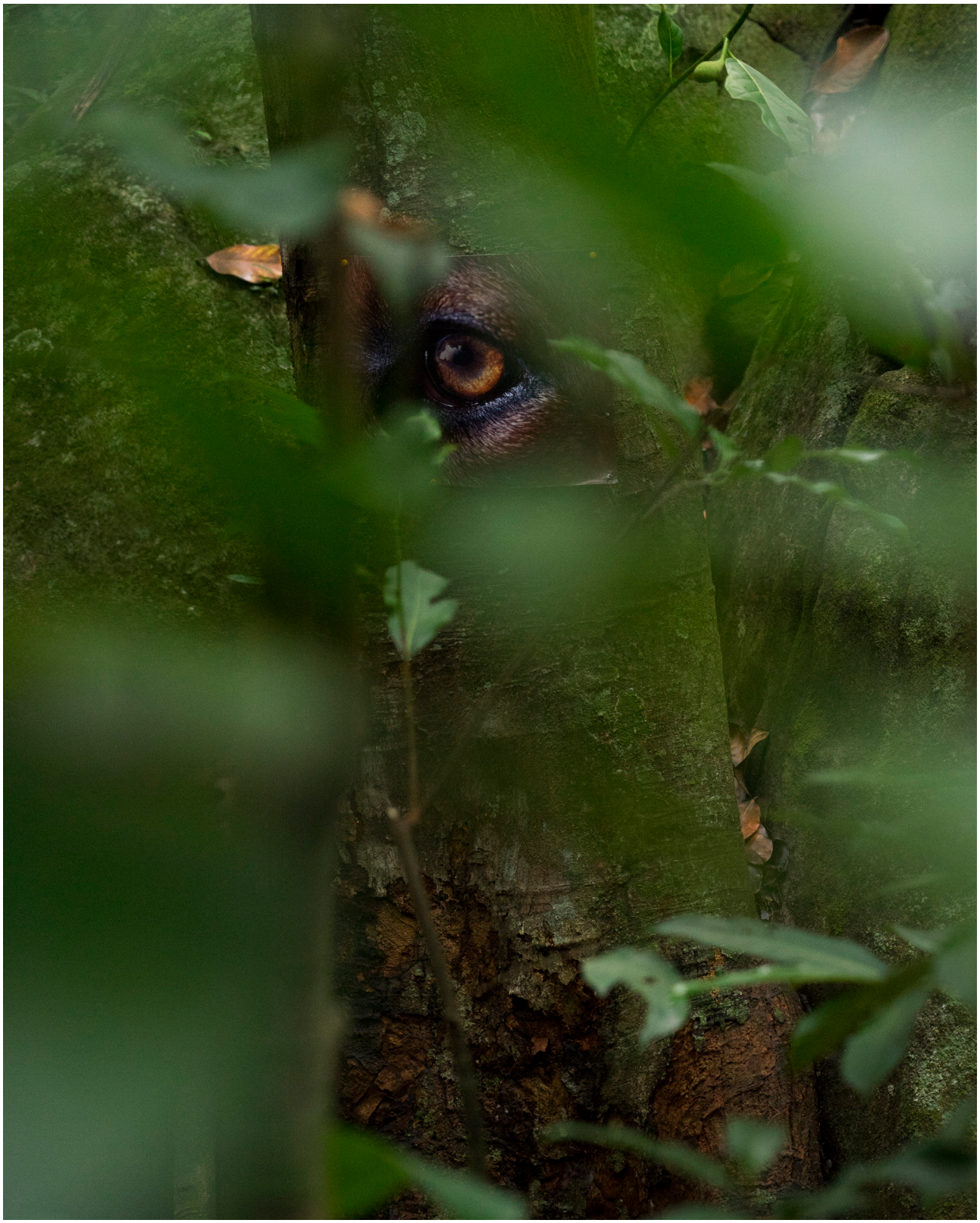

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Once part of a covenant, the great domesticated one, feral animals are exiles who now live in wild habitats. The circle was broken for them. Maybe by an atavistic power, they go back to a few of their old ways and traditions, and habitually avoid the race of men. All the same, they also, and mostly, create new ways and rituals. Some of the most common peoples-species that turn feral are cats, dogs, horses, and pigs. Once companion species, when the ancient pact of co-domestication is broken, the ill-fated ones have the crestfallen ability to *un-become-without* and walk another path, following a scent they sense from their ancestors no longer there. They become *feral*. Lévi-Strauss conceived *la pensée sauvage* (not *la pensée des sauvages*, as we are often reminded), a kind of "untamed" thought, kept alive in the modern western world within the "natural reserves" of art. Dogs cannot, as much as the wild calls them, become wolves; they are mostly a species-with-humans. Messmates. Few people would say they make art (but do they?). Yet, that does not mean mutts could not experience their own kind of *pensée sauvage*. A more captivating question, though, could be what mode of thought emerges when domesticated and wild collapse, promises are undone, their cosmos is wounded and they become feral.

text Juliana Fausto, images Daniel Steegmann Mangrané

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We are being looked at from one of the world's largest urban forests, the Tijuca National Park. The Atlantic Forest Biome, by the 19th century, that mountainous part of the Earth had already been ravaged by sugar cane and coffee plantations, fires and logging for charcoal production. The seemingly never-ending storm of both colonialism and capitalism was endangering Rio de Janeiro's water supply, and desertification was on the horizon. So, in 1861,

following Brazilian Emperor D. Pedro II orders, a group of enslaved men (lore says six of them, but new research suggests a credible number would be from 20 to 30) planted 100,000 seeds of mainly native plants. The forest became a National Park in 1961, by an executive order – a natural reserve.

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Feral dogs, those creatures not of nature nor culture, are now considered an ecological danger to the native species living in the forests they wander, both in the National Forest and elsewhere. Yet we see their eyes in the tree trunks. Are they becoming one with the trees? Are the trees looking through them? – at whom? At us? What do they see, what do they think, what do they say? This is a tentacular trans-becoming-matter, as one of the photos makes clear: an octopus-tree-mutt staring right at us: all bark, moss, dew, hair, eye, iris, leaf, dirt, humus. Forgotten dogs desecrate the natural reserve and mutter about the importance of commitments, but also about how connectedness is literally a matter of worlding and the possibility of reworlding – and that nature was never a virgin.

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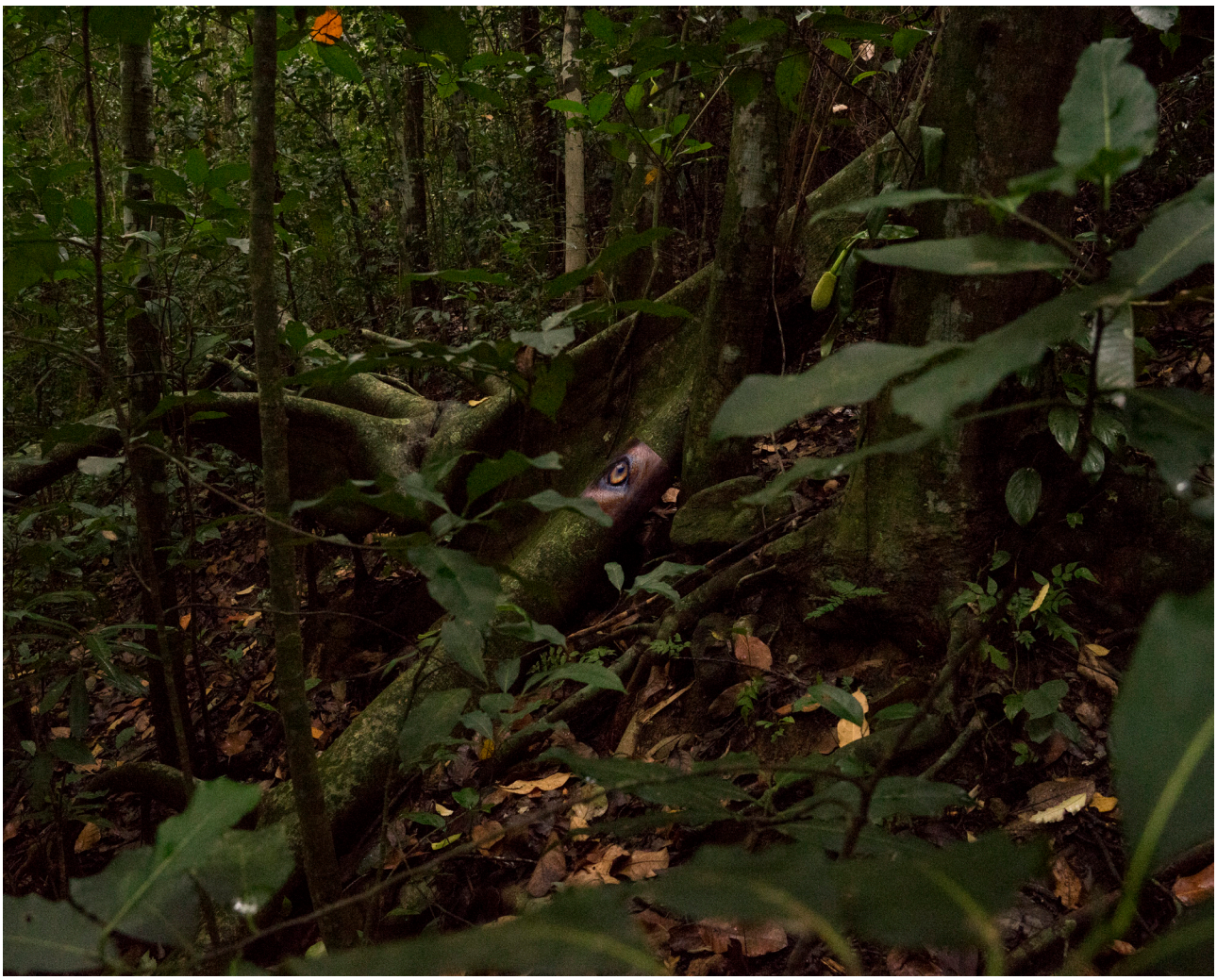

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The history of natural reserves is also a history of the expropriation of indigenous peoples from their territories. It is embedded in the domesticated thought that split culture and nature into two realms, one polluted, the other pure. By the time D. Pedro II was convinced there should be a forest in the city, although very much alive, natives were no longer welcome there, their populations decimated.. Presently, humans are not allowed to live in the park – albeit, for the dismay of conservationists, favelas surround the forest. Before the plantations, indigenous peoples used to walk there, surrounded by plants, animals and a plethora of other beings from many communicating realms. As new research shows, natives were actually responsible for shaping the Amazon rainforest. Some of them even raise dogs now. The forest watches.

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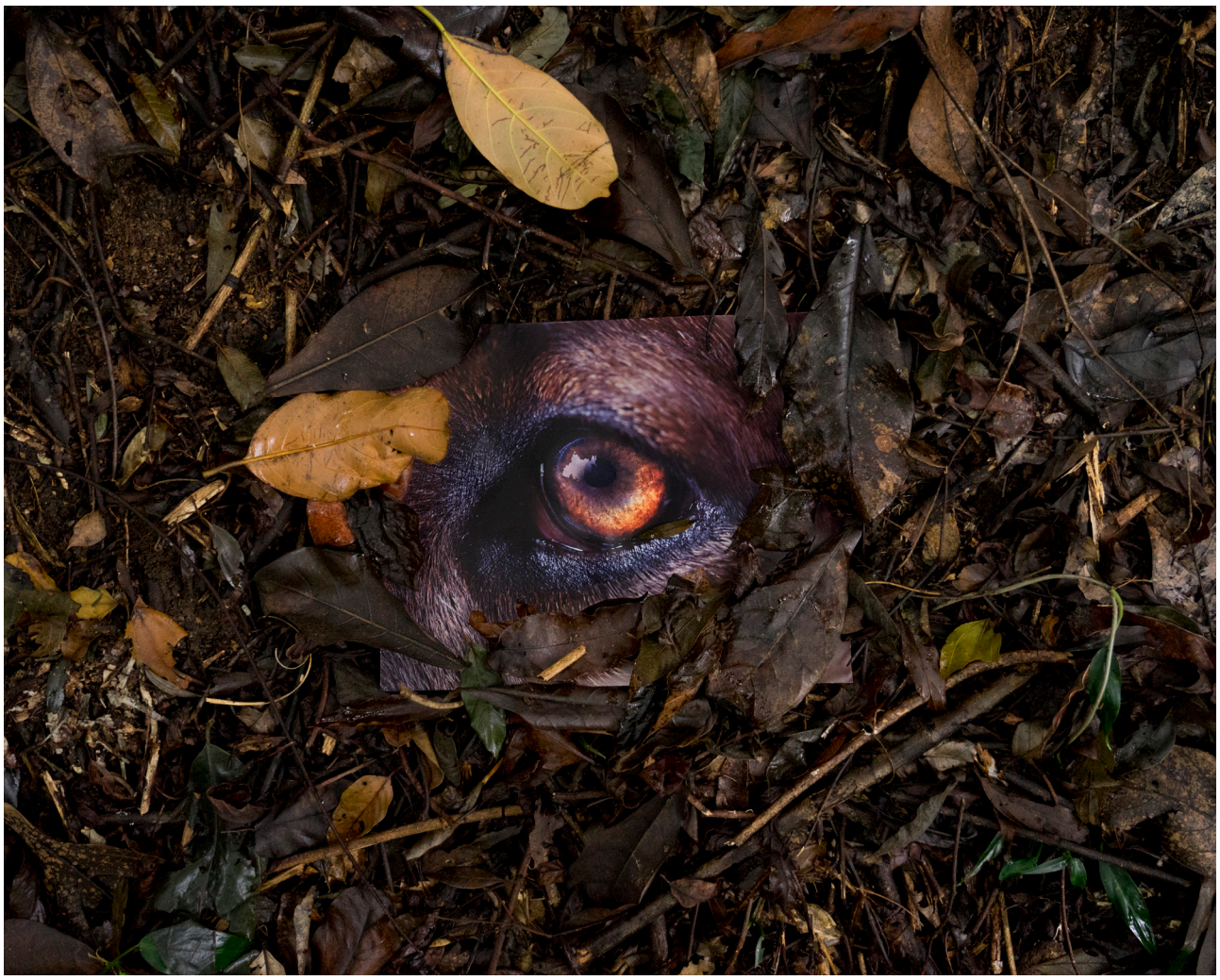

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In an article that described dogs as "destructive mammals", residents of Ipanema, one of Rio de Janeiro's wealthiest neighborhoods, when interviewed, were certain their purebred puppies would never cause any damage to the forest. The researchers agreed with them: "The problem isn't these dogs, who lead the coddled lives of European or American pets. The problem is the dogs in poorer and more rural communities, where the life of the dog is more frequently the life of hunger. They prowl the streets day and night with neither a collar nor an owner, looking for food wherever it can be found – in trash heaps, alongside roads, and in forests and fields, where they form packs to hunt and kill." Poor dogs, as poor people, live a harsh life. They join gangs and kill. Australian researchers, using data available in the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, placed dogs "in the number three spot after cats and rodents as the world's most *damaging invasive mammalian predators*." Last I checked, humans fit the criteria for predators. Nevertheless, the forest, planted by the hands of enslaved men, now surrounded by their descendants who were never coddled but sometimes have masters, watches. Forests, even young ones – after all, Tijuca is *only* 160 years old –, watch with their sharp dog eyes. They look back.

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When I was a child there was this record collection with little readalong booklets with stories and songs, full of beautiful illustrations. One of them had a song by Chico Buarque, “Passaredo”. Its lyrics haunt me to this day and go something like this: *Hey goldfinch/ Hi, common linnet/ blackbird, manakin/ Oh, white-faced whistling duck / Pauraque / Green-headed tanager, small-billed tinamou / Run, picazuro pigeon / Go, plumbeous seedeater / Song thrush, short-tailed nighthawk, blue-winged parrotlet / Shoo, brazilian tanager / Shoo, brazilian tanager / Shoo, nightingale, striped cuckoo / Disappear, double-collared seed-eater / Get out, corn bunting / Hide yourself, hummingbird / Fly, solitary tinamou / Fly, long-tailed tyrant / American kestrel / Keep your beak sealed / Beware / Here comes the man / Here comes the man.* There were no doubts for us brazilians. *Man* in the lyrics refers both to the military and to the species. The dictatorship had plans to destroy the Amazon rainforest, and they were partly successful. Indigenous peoples were their greatest human victims, with at least 8.000 killed. Man cannot be the species, but Anthropos, the civilized one, the one who wounded Earth and all of her people. In order to escape fascism, we may have to become feral, to transmute into something else. As Eva Hayward teaches us, “We are vulnerable to one another; our bodies are open to the planet.” The planet, by its turn, is hurt but not done. Those lonely eyes in an urban forest are witnesses.

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Russell Means used to say that “when the catastrophe is over, we American Indian peoples will still be here to inhabit the hemisphere. I don’t care if it’s only a handful living high in the Andes.” Those of us who are not indigenous, if we want to have a survival chance, might have to turn feral and forget about that Man birds and dogs and so many others have learnt to fear or even hate – and become others. That may be the lesson of the dog barks, the eyes in the tree trunks of a forest built together by many, including itself, as every forest is. We propose a feral thinking, a feral worlding, feral forests inhabited by “the future organisms we are becoming”, as Eva Hayward, once again, says. Where will we go when we abandon our Omelas? It certainly is not an easy path, but we like to think it resonates with Ursula Le Guin’s Ying’s utopia, the one that “involves acceptance of impermanence and imperfection, a patience with uncertainty and the makeshift, a friendship with water, darkness, and the earth.”

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