Kazuo Kadonaga

Wood/Bamboo/Paper/Silk

By Michael Laurence

Kazuo Kadonaga creates objects of contemplation. In the space each of his objects occupies and in the stillness of the space around them, the viewer's attention is focused quietly and compellingly toward meditation. What the viewer contemplates, these objects, all share one major feature. They are made of natural materials. This is not only an important fact but an important consideration in Kadonaga's art.

“I am not interested in creating beautiful objects,” he says. “What is of interest to me is discovering and disclosing the natural beauty of natural materials.”

To the Western world there is a far clearer division between art and what is termed 'crafts' which often involve the use of such medium as wood, fabric, paper, and clay. This distinction between the 'fine arts' and the 'applied arts' was never an issue in the Eastern world where the two - the beautiful and the practical - were as one. The art of Kazuo Kadonaga is an exemplar of this tradition, which we think of as particularly Japanese. But Kadonaga has pushed it radically into the twentieth century. With his numerous shows in North America, Mexico and Europe, Kadonaga's connection with the international art world relates especially to minimal or reductive art which grew out of the Conceptual movement in New York in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet his works disclose a beauty of natural content which was rarely a feature of the more intellectually conceived work of the Conceptual artists. This international but distinctly Japanese quality is apparent in each of the interrelated categories in which Kadonaga has turned his attention: wood, paper, bamboo and silk.

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Kazuo Kadonaga was born in Tsurugimachi, Ishikawa-ken in 1946. With his wife, Yumiko, he continues to live and work in Tsurugimachi dividing his time between his large studio there and one in downtown Los Angeles. Tsurugimachi is a village near the Sea of Japan. It is not accustomed to harboring a contemporary artist, although in the past it was a place of artisans who fashioned swords, clothing and objects for the monk-soldiers as Tsurugimachi was once known as a temple village.

The aftermath of the Second World War left Japan a devastated country concerned with the bare facts of survival and rebuilding. Kadonaga was born fortunate. His family had owned immense cedar forests and operated one of the largest lumber mills in the area since the beginning of the century. In this world somewhat separate from the rest of the war-demolished country and in this village with its strong sense of the traditional, it was assumed that the young Kazuo Kadonaga was destined to become part of the family's business in dealing with wood. Ironically, this is eventually what took place although not in the expected manner.

Against the expected, Kadonaga became an artist. First as a painter, then as a sculptor and/or Conceptual artist. Most artists use for subject matter or material that which is at-hand. Kadonaga did both: his material at-hand also became his subject matter. What was available and that which he knew best was wood. “I had taken trees for granted,” he has said. “When I began to study them in paintings I decided I should work directly with the material of the trees, to explore different ways of looking at a tree, not to take a tree for granted” 1

All great artists take nothing for granted. Influences may exist, but the work begins with the absolute freshness of discovery. Kadonaga discovered that the trees with which he grew up had a form and function beyond their usual daily use. That function was art. The form remained the properties that each tree already possessed. Only this needed to be explored and turned into their visual function. Fortunately, he had an abundance of material from which to create his art. Against the initial objections of a traditional family in a tradition-bound society, in the classic story of the young scion who desires to become an artist, Kadonaga determinedly pursued his own path and eventually secured the approval of his family.

In the early 1970s, his works were long, rectangular blocks of wood, usually with only deep scoops cut into them. These totemic figures were created to be

positioned vertically horizontally. This was followed with huge rectangular blocks carved to demonstrate the curvature possible with a solid form of wood. These were duplicated in clear plexiglass to form twin shapes of positive and negative space. He then returned to the enigmatic figure with tall rectangular wood blocks allowed to follow a natural, elongated crack almost splitting the wood. His next exploration in 1974 involved large logs, some with the bark removed and some with it left on, reformed around pre-cast inner cores of plexiglass. One could literally view inside the previously solid shape of the tree, yet with the log retaining its original form.

Using the delicate machinery of a veneer slicer, Kadonaga then cut long stripes of thin veneer from large cedar logs. Whether slightly unfurled while retaining their log shape or laid out in a discontinuous ribbon across a gallery floor, they changed the concept of use to an instance of dramatizing its pure form. Using the same veneering machine idea with its precision and delicacy of work, he also had carefully chosen logs stripped of their bark and sliced lengthwise in multiple layers. Reassembled, these became one of the natural objects for which his is now famous. Another direction, now equally well-known, was to slice halfway into a log in equal distances against the grain which allowed the wood to fissure and crack according to its own natural laws in relation to weather. Pieces such as Wood No.5Cl, with its fragility of the layering played off against the solidity of the reformed log. and Wood No.8P through Wood No.8Y with their sharp violence of the deep cracks are prime examples of these two methods.

From these beginnings, Kadonaga continued similar explorations with wood, with half-charring series of logs and the use of other process involving wood. Layered sheets of handmade paper formed into sculptural objects followed and a series using bamboo. His most recent work involves sericulture. This work has caused even more attention than usual, including a lengthy article in The New Yorker 2 featuring his silk worm pieces. That he and his work belonged on an international and not just national scale was clear to Kadonaga early on in his career. As in his work, he set about this with singular attention and determination. Following his first group and one-person shows in Japan, in 1972 he was showing his work in Mexico City. The next year, his work was seen in Germany and in Yugoslavia. In 1974, he spent a part of a year in Sweden and would then eventually have his first one-person shows in Europe in Sweden in 1979 and again in 1980. While continuing to show his work in Japan during those years, he was also exhibiting in New Zealand, Australia and San Francisco. In 1981 he had one-person shows in The Netherlands and in Los Angeles, followed in succeeding years with one-person shows in Honolulu, Hawaii and again in The Netherlands and Los Angeles.

Kazuo Kadonaga, as expected, is extremely serious and articulate about his work, about the process and both the physical and the metaphysical meaning of it. What is not expected from this tall, almost six feet, curly-haired and solidly built man is his droll and subtle humor. Although he as-yet only speaks a very idiosyncratic English, his verbal humor is expertly translated into English by his wife, Yumiko, who is able to instantly convey the subtleties of her husband's ironic wit into another language. Her own sharp wit, grace and diplomatic skills are lightly displayed in translating her husband to the English speaking world. They met during one of Kadonaga's one-person shows in The Netherlands, where Yumiko was then living. It is not necessary for Kazuo Kadonaga's physical skills in humor to be translated - they rise above any national or ethnic limitations. Kadonaga has the unexpected knack of being able to transform himself, with the simplest of gestures, facial changes and body movements, into a range of characters so ably conveyed that they leave no doubt in anyone's mind just who or what social demeanors are being mimed with humor ranging from the gentle caricature to the more scathing. His natural actor's ability instantly calls up a procession of personae including the young the old, male or female, Oriental or Occidental.

Kadonaga is a very multi-dimensional and complex person. His work, which may seem at first glance to be simple, is extremely complex. The physical presence of each of the materials he has chosen to work in suggests a confrontation between the object and the viewer, a relationship that once existed in prehistory between sacred objects and their viewer. Kadonaga's pieces present a view into nature that connects backward in time to this idea of the sacred object. The natural beauty of these pieces offer both a surface pleasure and an access into the rare state they describe As the art Writer Joan Hugo has written of Kadonaga's wood series, “Each piece in the series offers us the possibility of admiring qualities such as

color and texture, which are intrinsic to the materials, and also of considering the wood itself as subject matter.” 3

The physical beauty of these forms is enticing: smoke-stained bamboo or half-charred logs, filleted tree trunks reassembled and Changing with the weather deep layerings of handmade paper or the them and variations played by silk worms in spinning their cocoons. These display for us the cornucopia of the naturally beautiful that nature abundantly provides. On that visual and physical level, as Barbara Haskell has stated about contemporary earthworks, they are “… the communication of the expressive qualities inherent in the materials themselves…so that the physical properties of materials would be perceived with greater clarity.” 4 this exposure or revelation of natural materials in Kadonaga’s art is distinct from other areas of art, such as painting which may reveal a view of nature but not teace us about the actual physical fact of nature, or sculptural forms made from contemporary fabricated material.

Instead of being one step removed from nature by the man-made materials or these other arts, we are actually brought one step closer to nature. It is”… the Japanese ideal of wabi, ‘ultimate naturalness,’ the right juncture of things-in-this-world.” 5 To create this kind of work requires not only a sympathetic view of nature, but a sense of oneness with it, of connection. It requires “… the eye being restored to a state of innocence,” 6 as Lucy R. Lippard has commented about Conceptual artists. To achieve this quality of wdbi in one’s art, to have one’s vision in a state of innocence, albeit a very sophisticated innocence, is not solely a possession of Japanese artists. But it is a thread which has woven through the entire fabric of Japan's long history, involving not only art specifically but the mundane objects of daily use. Other countries and other cultures have also followed this precept, but through experience we have come to expect Japanese art to partake of this particular sense of forms in nature.

Three other artists among many who show their work in this country who participate in this quality of ultimate naturalness based on natural forms and materials are the Japanese born Mineko Grimmer who works with wood, bamboo, stones and ice and sculptor Seiji Kunishima who works mainly with stone and the American-born Ann Takayoshi Page who creates her art via wood, paper and soil. These artists share with Kazuo Kadonaga a sense of intimacy with their materials and a sense of connection to the richness found in natural phenomena. This same view was also an essential part of two movements arising in Japan within

Kadonaga's early years, the Gutai movement or 'Concrete' movement of the 1950s and, later, the Mono-ha or 'Object' group. This ultimate naturalness that artists such as Kadonaga, Grimmer, Kunishima and Page strive to accomplish and was a basic concept of the Gutai and Mono-ha groups, requires an essential keeness of vision and freshness of approach. It requires what John Cage has said about Robert Rauschenberg, “There is in Rauschenberg, between him and what he picks up to use, the quality of encounter. For the first time.” 7 This innocence is in its freshness of exploration into a country that has been mapped and charted before but never from each individual's vantage point. This sense of encounter and creation in accord with nature is grounded in what we associate with two words, Zen and *shibui*. The former, Zen, often mis-used and over-used, is familiar to the Western world while *shibui* is less so.

The concept of *shibui* arose from the time of the Japanese medieval civil wars, a time of great poverty. It could be defined as “a taste for the astringent!' This astringency implies the austere without being severe. Zen Buddhism and *shibui* produced the wellknown sand stone garden of Ryoan-ji, No plays, shakuhachi (the music of the bamboo flute) and the poetry form of haiku. In *shibui* landscape painting, for instance, the representation of a leaf or single branch suggested the entire tree. This minimalism, as we might call it today, is exactly what has been said of the work of the imminent artist Isamu Noguchi: “. . . following the natural inclinations of the material, adding only the minimum of finishing touches to bring out latent shapes and qualities.” 8

One has only to look at the wood's natural curve and torque brought out in Kadonaga's Wood No.10 J or Wood No.10 K or Wood No.10 L to find these latent qualities brought forth from the wood's natural inclinations. Although more elaborate, Kadonaga's silk pieces like visual poetry explore the configurations that silk worms naturally create. In works such as these and others in Kadonaga's oeuvre, we are in the presence of nature bared and presented in the purity of art.

Yet, there is a profoundness in art such as this which goes beyond the level of admiration of nature for its own physically beautiful self. This physical

plateau is as if a step toward a metaphysical explanation which can never be precisely defined. It is a form of mysticism. As an example, ' the - American Trancendentalists of the.19th Century, such as Thoreau and Emerson, turned to nature to contemplate a reality that lay beyond their view in the physical world.

This unknowable world is not necessarily found in the forms of art, "... but in the potential 'circuits' made in our consciousness when we come in contact with those forms and expressions" 9 Kadonaga's work also shares certain qualities with current American Conceptual artists, such as Sol LeWitt, whom Kadonaga acknowledges was an early influence on his own art. LeWitt has said: "Conceptual artists are mystics rather than rationalists." 10

These concepts are echoed by Isamu Noguchi, who has written, "Sculpture may be made of anything and will be valued for its intrinsic sculptural qualities. However, it seems to me that natural mediums… alive before man was, have the greater capacity to comfort us with the reality of our being." 11 Kazuo Kadonaga has said: "Each living thing, plant or animal, has a soul: my art is revealing the soul." 12

Kadonaga's art, these physical objects fashioned in accord with nature from natural materials and fashioned for our contemplation, do not exist independent of the long history of the world in which they are created. Nothing does. Certainly not in the world of art. Even though some movements or actual objects may seem to appear abruptly on the scene in the art world, like everything else they are actually a part of the continual stream of history, sometimes in reaction against' previous forms of art, sometimes carrying forward by modifying the past. Kadonaga's work obviously is very much part of the present time and connected to the avant-garde in international sculpture of the last twenty-five years. It is also singularly and distinctively his own as he explores avenues that few if any other artists have traversed, in particular his most recent sericulture pieces. But Kadonaga's work is also intrinsically connected to history and especially the history, the culture and viewpoint of his own country. To better comprehend his work we must step back to about the 3rd millenium B.C.

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There are two important prehistory forms of Japanese art: Jomon pottery and *Haniwa* (cylinders of terra-cotta). The Jomon vessels from the third millenium B.C. were the actual beginnings of Japanese sculptural forms. These large and extraordinary shaped neolithic clay storage jars were decorated with both geometric and organic designs. The much later fourth or fifth century *Haniwa*, with stylized bodies and large heads, were terra-cotta figures placed upright in the ground to define sacred spaces during the Old Tomb Period and combined naturalism and abstraction to suggest the figure. Both the Jomon pottery and the Haniwa were rediscovered in the nineteenth century and influenced Japanese sculptors in the 1960s and 1970s.

A reverence for natural materials in relation to religion began with Shintoism. It is Shinto which bridges the early years with the present more than the later Buddhism. Shinto was a nature cult with the belief that the 'Kami' or gods resided in natural objects such as trees, water, mountains, rocks. Kami was not seen as a figurative equivalent but as an 'essence' residing in nature. These natural objects defined certain spaces or were used to make spaces sacred, the object *(shintai)* itself being sacred in this nature cult. Many of the 'Earthworks' of the last couple of decades, in particular those of Michael Heizer, repeat premises of the archetypal Shinto. The quality of reverence for wood and locating the essence of nature within it is an obvious component of Kazuo Kadonaga's wood pieces. Another example in a different culture which has had a clear impact on sculptural form and meaning in the twentieth century was the same use of stone or rocks in Avebury, England during the periods 3250-2600 B.C. near the smaller and later Stonehenge.

The beginnings of the long-held major conventions of Japanese art were established 1,400 years ago with the assimulation of Buddhism in the sixth century. For the next nine centuries the main occupation of Japanese artisans was the making of Buddhistic images. In the ninth century there was the dramatic change from making of bronze images of Buddha, the original material used in China and Korea from where Buddhism

came into Japan, to the making of Buddha images in unpainted wood, unpainted except for details such as hair, eyes and mouth. A prime example is the Medicine Buddha in the Jingoji temple in Kyoto which is made of cedar, used for both the texture and grain of the wood and the aromatic cedar itself.

The first foreigners to penetrate 7apan came in the mid-sixteenth century. These were the Portuguese

followed by the Dutch. But within a hundred years, Japan closed its borders under the Edo period of history (1615-1868) in which intrinsically Japanese art flourished, such as calligraphy, utensils for the Tea Ceremony, Zen stone gardens and *ukiyo-e*. When Commodore Perry and the U.S. Navy entered Japan in 1853 and the Meiji Restoration period began, the change in all things including the arts was swift and dramatic. The samurai tradition ended and with it the various arts that were part of it. The many artisans who formerly created objects for the samurai turned to netsuke carving and the carving of ivory. An anti-Buddhist maG1lent had the same effect on the artisans wh6 had created Buddhistic images. Foreign painters and sculptors, mainly Italian, were imported to teach in the art schools. With no previous tradition of secular sculpture the Japanese did not even had a word for it in their language. Japan's own counter-influence on Western art in the ninteenth century and early twentieth century is most apparent in painters like Degas, Gauguin and Toulouse-Latrec. Japan, in turn, had to catch up in one hundred years on five hundred years of European art.

Although Japan is small country, roughly the size of the North American state of Montana, it assumes a large position in terms of world history. One of Japan's features is its ability to assimilate other country's traditions and transform them into its own. For the first half of this century, Japanese art was mainly representational, realistic and decidedly nineteenth century European.

Two shows were imported into Japan in the 19SOs which had a rippling effect on contemporary Japanese art. The first was the 1951 Art in France Today' which brought the avant-garde to Tokyo with the effect equal to the explosiveness in North America of the Armory Show in New York in 1913. The major 'International Art Today' show in Tokyo in 1956 followed up the earlier show and reinforced the cultural impact of international contemporary art in Japan.

In this climate of exposure to contemporary art, there arose in Japan in the 1950s the Gutai ('Concrete') promoted 'idea art' and created action, kinetic and environmental art and performance. This movement was followed by the Taka-Aka-Naka group (High Red Center) who continued many of the Gutai principles. This was followed in turn in the 1960s by the Mono-ha or 'Object' group or 'School of Thingness' not unlike its counterpart in the U.S. of 'Process Art! The Mono-ha artist's aim "was to broaden awareness of our immediate environment. Their method was the placing of existing material in space." 13

Among the many well-documented works that came out of that particular period were Susumu Koshimizu's very large bags constructed of Japanese paper which sat open on the floor with a stone inside. Katsuhiko Narita's 'Charcoal' series of blocks of wood which had been charred in charcoal-making 'owns and Kishio Suga's installation at the Venice Biennale of twenty cedar logs split vertically with half of them standing on end to form a square and the other halves on the floor.

In New York at about the same time, Constructivist, Minimalist and Conceptual artists were working in anti-pedestal formats manipulating space or allowing chance or nature to operate and to determine the work's outcome. "Whereas art traditionally has been concerned with stability and permanency, these works are concerned with change and metamorphosis." 14 Another focus was "the possibility of non-verbal communication of ideas." 15 Sol LeWitt was promoting an emphasis on the concept behind the work of art, Joel Shapiro was placing his work directly on the floor, Michael Heizer and Alice Aycock, acting in accordance with natural phenomena, were interrupting, disrupting or augmenting it on site. Others were exploring series, such as Walter de Maria with his The Broken Kilometer gallery installation of five hundred solid brass rods which totaled a kilometer or, later, his lightening rods placed outdoors in New Mexico. Repetition or series or variations on the same theme has its own historical antecedences with Monet's fifteen views of Haystacks begun in 1888 and his series of cathedrals or Hosukai's Hundred Views of Mt. Fuji.

In Japan during this time the emphasis, although connected to that of the New York movements, possessed a singular difference. As has been written about the Mono-ha group, their "…works retained their humanity without assuming man to be the center of the universe. The works were never as coldly, industrially repetitive as sculpture by Donald Judd or Carl Andre, they never had the brutal or threatening qualities of Richard Serra's sculptures, and they never took as a goal the avoidance of intimacy or the sensuousness of materials, as Robert Morris advised." 16

This was the national and international climate into which Kazuo Kadonaga came of age and began creating his art in the early 1970s.

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Wood has been Kadonaga's most extensively used material, generally cedar from his family's mountain forests and also oak and pine. Kadonaga has described how he selects each tree himself for use from his family's vast forests. He wears his heaviest clothing and treks into the mountains before the winter snow. “At this time of year the surface of the wood is also very hard because of the tree's natural protection against the cold weather. We strip the bark off quickly before the wood has a chance to dry.” I7 Some of these trees have been growing from the time his family has been in the lumber business since the beginning of this century.

These wood pieces, numbered in series, range from the shorter logs slightly cut at one end and hit with a mallet where they fissure through the entire log according to each log’s own original growth pattern, such as Wood No. I IBH, to full-length logs often measuring eighteen feet in length which have been sliced lengthwise in thin layers and then reassembled, Wood No. 5Cl and Wood No.5CL as examples. Others of similar length have been cut partly through against the grain and in their curing produce their own cracking between the cuts, such as the entire series of Wood No.8P through Wood No.8Y.

This intervention with nature by cutting down and then thinly slicing a log but letting the natural progression of its own
warping according to weather and time “demonstrates the dynamic between happenstance and control. A cedar beam is laterally cross-sectioned into hundreds of paper-like slices, then re-assembled into a beam-shaped object that takes on a brushstroke-like ripple from the grain inherent in the material. Tension in a natural object is released, recognized and exaggerated by human manipulation” 18

Demonstrating the constant change inherent in these wood pieces was their dramatic natural process when they were brought from an exhibit in The Netherlands, where the pieces kept their original profiles in the damp climate, to a show in Los Angeles during a dry season where they began to curl and warp like waves. To regain and retain its shape, each of the wood pieces is moistened and wrapped in cloth bindings after each exhibit.

Kadonaga has also taken carefully chosen logs and, leaving the bark still on, had the upper portions slowly charred in a kiln, with the lower portions buried in sand to preserve their original form. This group, Wood No.7A, these charred emblems of change and metamorphosis in a long row of twenty pieces across the gallery floor, is probably the darkest aspect of Kadonaga's vision in relation to nature.

Kadonaga's use of bamboo later in 1984 utilizes the simplest of techniques to clarify the possibilities of the material. The large (fifty pieces) Bamboo No. I was slowly heated to bring out the deeply glowing sheen of its resin in much the same glowing tones of the inside roofs of old Tea Houses. The Bamboo No.2 series is of bamboo in various stages of being frayed into narrow bands. The extreme variations in length, from 50 to 177 inches, and the difference in the length of the narrow strips gives a sense of process in motion like non-human equivalents of frames from a Muybridge series of photographs. The copper wires that bind the long, cut lengths of Bamboo No.2D return the disassembled poles to their original forms, creating objects of contemplation out of the simplest of materials and methods.

Before returning to the use of bamboo, in 1983 Kadonaga turned his attention to another natural material: handmade paper. His well-known and extensive series of paper works in the very intimacy of the material show best the sense of Kadonaga's desire to have his materials stand on their own without the imprint of the artist. Although he peels each sheet back himself by hand to create the geometric forms, the washi, or handmade mulberry paper, and its compression into blocks of very durable paper is done by others. This is true throughout Kadonaga's work, with some exception in the Silk Series: it is his concept which is carried out by assistants and technicians (and by the natural inclinations of his materials) to create his vision.

The geometric shapes of the paper pieces and the sheer size of them play against the visual fragility of the material. The number of sheets of washi ranges from 1,000 upwards to 3,000 sheets in Paper No.1BF

Kadonaga's latest explorations travel into an area where no other Conceptual artist has ventured: sericulture. If wood, paper and bamboo relate to the arts of the Orient, silk is definitely indigenous. Sericulture came into Japan from China as far bask as the fourth century. It is one of Kadonaga's talents to see the possibilities within the daily, the quotidian, the practical and with minimal manipulation turn this into

an art form. A reviewer has written about this particular series, although it is applicable to the entire body of the artist's work: "They combine simplicity and strength of form with complexity and delicacy of detail, stability with suggested movement and the balance of completed form with the potentiality of raw material. The complex interplay between man-made and natural, geometry and irregularity, order and randomness is especially strong." 19

In an hour-long color video documenting the process of the Silk Series we can see swarming containers of silk worms being fed their traditional diet of mulberry leaves. In close-ups, these finger-length, opaquely white and mottled silk worms resemble creatures from a science fiction or horror film. Yet the artist, his wife and his assistants handle them with more humor than squeamishness. As also documented in the New Yorker article, 20 a hundred thousand silk worms were released onto pine or cedar gridwork frames. This is the same framework used in sericulture in general. The silk worms literally went house-hunting, each seeking a space in which to spin their cocoons. Since they tend to travel toward the top, in the forty-eight hours in which it takes for them to settle in, Kadonaga
and his assistants had to frequently turn the frames to deceive the silk worms into filling the entire structures. The spinning process was stopped by steam, exactly as in the manufacturing of silk, so that the long silk threads of the cocoons would not be broken by the emerging moths.

All the Silk Series works - from the larger, almost wall size to the smaller - possess a stillness, a view of a natural process halted for us to contemplate. This is nature, in all of its complexity. This is art that reaches far back into the history of the artist's country and combines it with the most avant-garde of Conceptual art.

When I recently asked Kazuo Kadonaga what material he might next be using he side-stepped, not about to give away any secrets on upcoming projects and replied with a Puckish grin, “Stone, maybe. Or possibly glass. Iron?”

Whichever direction Kadonaga turns next in his art, it will follow Jasper John's seemingly autistic statement:

> “Take an object
> Do something to it
> Do something else to it.” 21

Kadonaga's vision and, therefore, his art interprets the natural world through his variety of natural materials. For Kazuo Kadonaga, it is the same as Noguchi has said: "I am always looking for a new way of saying the same thing.” 22

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