

The Year of
Aesthetics
MIDDLESEX COLLEGE



24 Hour / 250 Word
Ekphrastic Contest

FALL 2025

featuring art by
Cypress Wilde



INTRODUCTION



On Saturday, October 18, 2025 at 11:59 pm, an email went out to about three dozen people -- students, staff, and faculty -- who had courageously stepped forward to participate in Middlesex College's very first Year of Aesthetics's 24-Hour, 250-Word Ekphrastic Writing Contest. The rules were simple and few. Aside from the time and word limit and a prohibition on using AI, writers were free to create a story of any genre or writing style based on the artwork of Middlesex College student, Cypress Wilde. A photograph of Wilde's sculpture, a piece from a series entitled, "Tide Pools and Coral Reefs" was attached to the email to serve as the ekphrastic inspiration.

And so launched the creative challenge countdown.

The contest was just one of the many events and activities in part of The Year of Aesthetics, a year-long initiative at Middlesex College spanning the 2025 - 2026 academic year to encourage students, staff, and faculty to consciously reflect on the value of aesthetic experiences in our lives and to see how aesthetics threads across all disciplines.

The first story arrived at 12:54 am, less than an hour after the official start of the contest. And over the remaining hours of the contest, 13 other people would successfully complete the challenge, the last story arriving just 6 minutes before the deadline.

Submissions ranged from essays to poetry, from fable to haiku. Not all stories were written in English. And one story included went well over 250 words. (The writer noted that she just couldn't restrain her momentum as the story began to roll out!) As the talent of Middlesex College took to the task, works as beautiful, smart, and diverse as our community were returned.



ABOUT THE ARTIST

Cypress Wilde (they/them) is a queer disabled artist and author living in New Jersey. Their poetry collections include *I'm Stuck in Limbo*, *But Please Don't Save Me* and others. They have been published by *Moss Puppy Mag*, *Auvert Mag*, and others. You can find them on Instagram at [cypresswilde](#).

Their handmade zines can be found at South Street Art Mart in Philadelphia.



But, in the end, only one story could be crowned the winner. The impossible task was given to a team of Year of Aesthetics professors who shouldered the responsibility bravely. When votes were tabulated, one ekphrastic stood out.

Congratulations to Aarzo Brahmbhatt, the author of "Ocean Remembers" for crafting our first place ekphrastic!

Congratulations, too, to our second and third place winners, respectively, Rebecca Deally's "Last Entry of Dr. Scheil on Extermination Voyage 489" and Connor Beatrice's "Rot".

On behalf of The Year of Aesthetics and everyone at Middlesex College, THANK YOU to everyone who participated. We look forward to challenging you again in Spring 2026 with a brand new midnight ekphrastic. To make sure you're on the email list for our next writing contest, please send an email to MCWrites@middlesexcollege.edu.

And without any further ado, please enjoy all of the creative returns on the pages that follow ...

Warmly,

Nikki Gonzalez

Psychology Instructor
Ekphrastic Writing Contest Organizer
Enthusiastic Year of Aesthetics Contributor

EKPHRASTIC
a vivid, often dramatic,
verbal description of a
visual work of art,
either real or imagined

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OCEAN REMEMBERS
by
Aarzoo Brahmhatt



They say the ocean forgets,
but I know it remembers,
in every twist of the coral,
in every hollow place where silence echoes.

Once we were complete and whole.
Our laughter made its way through time,
soft as clay before it turned into ceramic.
We built something living,
something that breathed between us,
until the fire came.
And in its warmth, we cracked.

Now, I see us in everything broken.
The ridges,
which hold your fingerprints still,
trapped in the glaze of memory.
Each curve and imprint remembers,
how we touched, and
how we were pulled apart.



If love is art,
then heartbreak is what inspires the artist,
they mold, they etch every pain, every sorrow,
into the sculptures-
that begin to erode,
but refuse to collapse.

I keep the fragments,
I feel the sharp edges and let them hurt.
I let the saltwater burn on my wounded skin,
and place them gently back into me.
You are no longer here,
yet you remain,
in the way my voice breaks on our song,
in the way my heart shatters every time,
to fit itself- for what's missing.

We were never meant to last,
only to leave a mark deep enough
that the ocean remembers-
two souls that shattered beautifully,
and called it love.

**LAST ENTRY OF
DR. SCHEIL ON
EXTERMINATION
VOYAGE 489
by
Rebecca Deally**



I remember staring at that strange plant, astonished by all its beige stalks and coppery polyps. Openings like gaping mouths released that tantalizing aroma. A musky, syrupy, succulent scent. Unlike the acrid metal that fills my nose daily.

Botanists should never end up miles above earth, living in space, but I was the one who had discovered the horrid thing and its deadly disease. If I'd known that sweet scent was a warning sign, I'd have crushed it under my loafers. That's a lie, I couldn't destroy natural beauty. It's a living diamond in my eyes.

Living? How crazy am I to consider it *living*.

It's my only real company in this aimless steel cocoon.

I was sent up here alone to dispose of it. The less people, the less chance of a second outbreak. I've always worked with a team and now it's just me and the plant.

Am I so crazy to think that plant is alive? Its trembling leathery stalks make me wonder.

I checked on it earlier, before I sat down for my rehydrated supper. One of its tubes had shrunk and had curled in my direction. I was invited to gaze inside that glossy orifice swirling with beige and dusty blue and as I did, two thin flaps of clear tissue snapped together then shriveled up out of sight. Almost like it was winking.

To think I've gone that crazy! Imagine that! Thinking a plant was *winking* at me!



...it must think I'm real special.

ROT
by
Connor Beatrice



Rot

I can feel the soft touch of rot enter my body as time marches on, that last love from the world
as she pulls me back to her loving embrace
As I lie on this forest floor I can see the last light of the moon as
the mushrooms grow over my once living form
As I helplessly watch on from my vantage point above the form I once inhabited

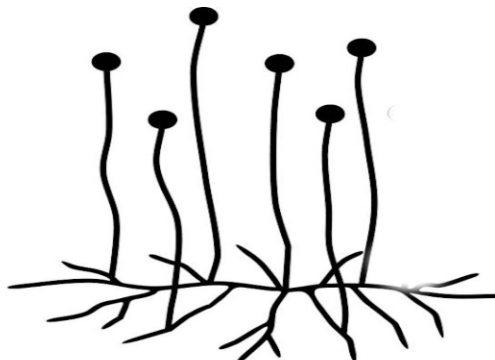
Wood

I can hear the creaking of the wood as my body breaks down The
roots are growing ever closer to my body now draped in a funeral
shroud of mycelial love desperate to consume my flesh and make
me part of the world again

Decay

My body is gone

My flesh consumed by the world as my bare sun-bleached bones act as a starting point for
the fungal forms born of my doom



(continued...)

Death...

I am free at last

no longer bound to the imprisoning form of my skin and bone

I can hear the reaper calling my name, a sound now foreign to my mind

Though it remains as melodic as I remember

Though that name is not mine any longer

I have no name that can be spoken in the tongues of men

It is now only known to the carrion birds and growing decay

They sing my name in eldritch songs passed through the
shroud blanketing my body and through the call of vultures
picking away at my form

Rot

I can't feel it anymore

The feeling of the world's final grasp is now foreign to my soul

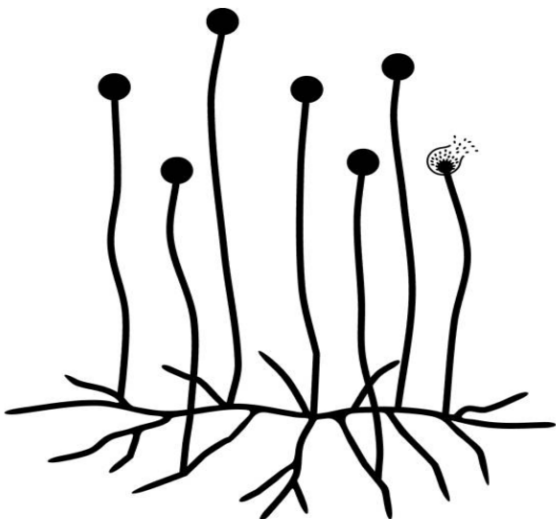
Time has stilled like a river dammed up

I long for a love I can no longer know

Those tendrils of eldritch and unknowable care

Stemming from a being so much greater than me

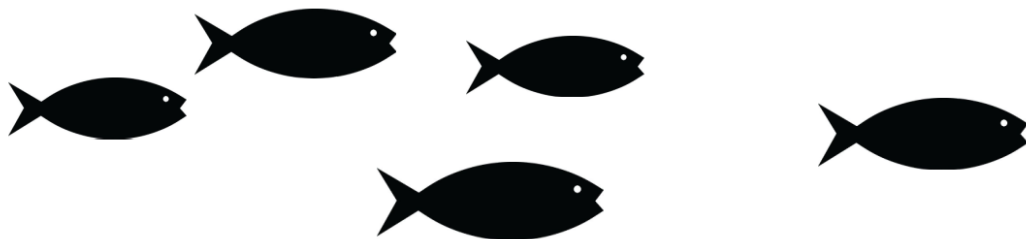
How I long to once again be flesh so that I may learn the feeling anew



LITTLE FISHIES
by
Tayyab Abbasi



The little fishies lived in a home called The Nebula. The Nebula had been their home all their life. They loved the Nebula so much and cared for it. Each year they would repaint it. The Nebula had two porches on the right and one main sleeping / living room area on the left. The Nebula had previously been under attack by the big fishies. The last attack was in 1994 and that's when the porches were used as bubble gun shooting ranges. And the living room was the place where the kid fishies took cover. The little fishies fought off the big fishies even though they were outnumbered. They lost a ton of their people. There used to be thousands of Nebulas but now there's sadly only one left. And the one family, the Osters are living in it. The Osters are the only ones left of their people. Their advances in their warfare made the Old Osters successful. Their biggest advancement was the Bubble Gun 4000. This shot bubbles with rapid speed making it very hard for the big fishies to even come close. The Osters are proud of their family's invention and are proud to be the last surviving family of the little fishies since the historical big fishes vs little fishies war. However this also leaves them incredibly lonely and sad. But they have hope that one day they will repopulate so much that once again the little fishies will have a kingdom.



Pieces
by
Tammy Acevedo



There are pieces of me at the bottom of my soul.
Tiny fragments of my brilliance that cracked off with every insult.
Every shame. Every pain.
Every nauseating sear of disdain,
or rage...

They sink, one by one.
My mind's eye watches them founder from the moment they break
to the ethereal way in which they float through the viscous flow within me
until they settle at the bottom of the ocean inside my spirit.

And once there...

Oh, once there...

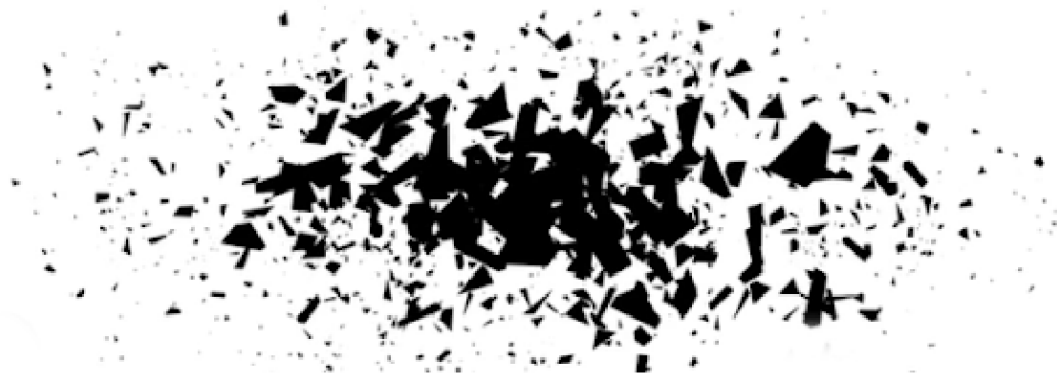
They bloomed.

Each of the pieces different, they morphed, grew - they hardened.
My very own trauma coral garden,
FORCING me to grow through grief.

Reminding me that nothing ever dies,

and that within each of the pieces

a piece of love lies.



**THE BEAUTY OF THE
CORAL**
by
Ava Contreras

Within the beautiful ecosystem of the ocean, it holds a breathtaking secret. The magnificent beauty of the coral. Hundreds, maybe even thousands of stunning colors and living organisms are unearthed and often overlooked within the vast array of fish and other Sealife. The coral, meaningless to some, serves much greater purposes to all Sealife around it. Coral is what some species of marine-life call home. Surrounded by beautiful colors and structure, species such as clownfish, crabs and starfish and even bio organisms can call these awe-striking species their humble happiness. These amazing corals are safety to these wonderful species and sanctity to nurture and care for their beloved babies. The purpose of the coral is to provide shelter, food and even circulation for young ones within the ecosystem. Though not many have the privilege to see these immaculate creations with the naked eye so many Sea creatures have more than the privilege. Sharks, whales and sea turtles live around the coral reefs and revolve around them entirely. With enchanting colors and colonies that stretch far and wide they have not only the power to protect smaller sealife from the uncertainty of the deep, but they can also eat, change color, survive and even reproduce entirely on their own! The strongest soldier of the unknown, the beauty of the ocean, lies within the coral.



**HORRORS OF THE
SEA**
by
Nicolle Duarte



I was younger when I was told to never get near the ocean at night despite living right next to it. There were always unnerving rumors and whispers around the town of an alleged creature sweeping anyone up never to be seen again as I was growing up. I always believed it to be a folk tale along with my friends Marla and Ruben, and we always wanted to debunk that tale. On the night of my 18th birthday, we all snuck away from my beach home to be near the sea. We laughed, made jokes, and made fun of our town; calling them gullible to believe such a tall tale. I got distracted looking for seashells and excitedly found one, and I turned around not seeing either of my friends. I walked and called out to them and heard sounds behind a sizeable rock, and I groaned believing it was an attempt at a prank, but my eyes widened seeing the sand strewn with blood. I heard Ruben calling to me in pain horrified to find his arm nearly split in two as I call out to Marla for help as I tried to tend to his wounds as I called 911... I will never forget hearing Marla's blood curdling screams and my head jerked to witness the creature- an enormous kraken yet alien looking thing with three glowing red eyes...various tentacles descending into the sea with her...I never saw her again.



Nobody seemed to like me, that is until I met the boy next door. He seemed to be a gentleman. Kind. Caring. Empathetic. Every little girl's dream. Dreams are meant to be crushed, I suppose. He moved away before I got to confess my feelings for him. And though we did not get to properly say our goodbyes, he was the first boy to have taught me what love was. What love is.

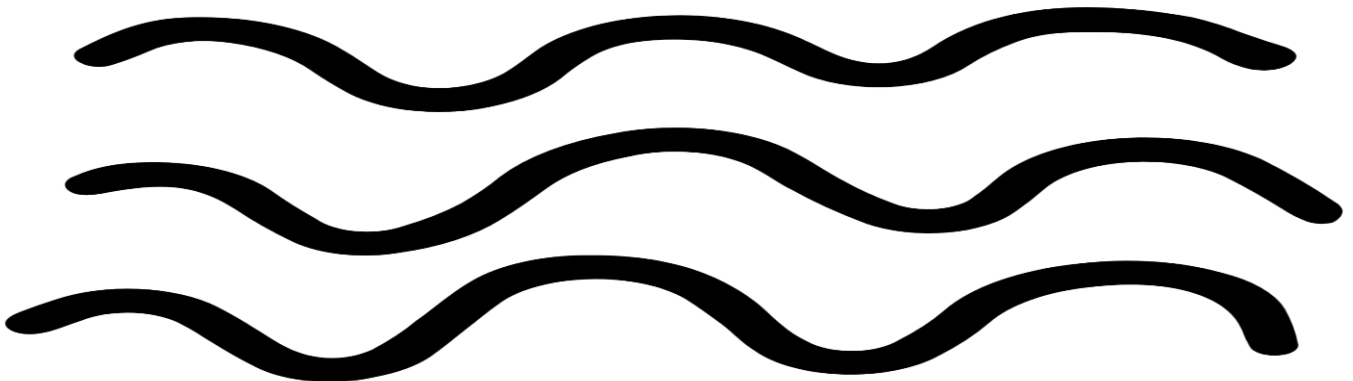
The beach held a special place in our hearts. It's where we met every day for the summer. We would sit on the end of the pier and just ramble on about our lives, about the future of us. Michael promised. He said he would take me with him somewhere far away from this place. He said I would find peace there, even though it was a city. Oh, what a weird little thought that the boy had. My protector, guarding me from all my enemies.

Now, all I have left of him is his ring that he gave to me, and I'll be waiting at the end of the pier down by the beach.



Sandy shores take time,
Rocks degrade from wind and rain.

Waves wash over, cold.



Mea Culpa
by
Ashley Hector



"The boat is sinking"

But the words stay stuck under the ichor that insists itself within my lungs.
And how could I, with that dawning star crowning you, or, "we".
The apotheosis of your dreams.

"I think we are too far out."

I heard it moreso, before I saw the paddle hit my eye.
Watching as you thrashed through the topside hull.
Wood splintering under my nails, holding onto mine.

"I'm where I want to be."

What could I do but adore your cold, cold, smile.

"So... what happened?"
It's what they always ask me about you.
I remember,
The way you tried to crawl into my skin,
To fit on what remained of our tiny plank.
Your eyes peaking through the waves,
Stillness is so foreign on you.
"I think there was a hole in the boat"

My reflection is incomplete without you, a piece of my soul buried with you.
I'm sorry for leaving it there.
I know you don't want it.

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I can see it in the way you look at me in the mirror.
Tiny body doused in rage, heart dripping ire, pale eyes with the spark burnt out
Eyes trembling when we meet and I can't look away, don't want to, not yet.

"Did I do something wrong?"

"No. You're perfect."

The water at my shoulders.
The ocean meeting your eyes.

I can still taste my blood in my mouth,
Your animosity too.
It's ours now,
I'd do anything to savor what's left of you.



**INNER WORKINGS
I SEE
by
Cherokee Sunrise**



A piece inside of me
I see veins and arteries - and an eyeball!
This is art Reflecting the beauty of my inner workings.

My inner workings could appear to be ugly. They may not be fully appreciated.
But we all look like this inside. Even if we choose to ignore it.

How can we have the outside without first having whats inside? The heart is created first; that spark of life that prepares our inner workings for the outer world.

There are other inner workings - that are hidden from all. No one knows what you are doing in your secret place except for you. And it could be quite beautiful, depending on how you utilize your time.

These are the inner workings that Allow me to see and to breathe and to have blood run through my veins.

The inner workings that make life possible, that even make life Joyful.

This is far more than just a physical representation.
This is the feeling of soul searching work, the undoing of childhood traumas, the facing of my fears. And overcoming them.

I feel like this some days; I look this some days.

And yet if it weren't for this hodgepodge co-creation, I wouldn't have growth, I wouldn't have love, I wouldn't have passion,

I wouldn't have who I am today - if it weren't for the inner workings.

So thank you

For all that you do that I see, and that I don't see, but I Love.



LA PERLA PROIVIDA
by
María Ferrero



Era una vez entre el reinado de los prehistórico marino se encontraba un pequeño cangrejo llamado anemona el cual le encantaba reconectar cosas para crear un caparazón que cuidara su cuerpo tan vulnerable y a comparación a otros cangrejos que simplemente se escondían o salían a la superficie para sobrevivir por las noches este buscaba rocas y anemonas incluso erizos para colocarlo en su espalda como caparazón, lograba espantar ciertos peces grandes incluso otros cangrejos que querían robar su comida . pero un día en especifico avía llegado un pulpo a la bahía de el siendo avisado por los demás cangrejos siendo imposible defenderse aunque tenga una coraza fuerte o puntiaguda esto no seria suficiente para detenerlo pues por tristeza y temor tubo de dejar el mar saliendo a la superficie notando una gran playa desolada y un intenso bosque de plantas siendo aterrador para este , volviendo al agua. Pasado el atardecer y la luz de la noche asechando de repente siente que lo observan este por costumbre se esconde bajo arena junto con su protección que era una caracola y un erizo pegado pero de repente es fuertemente lanzado siendo todo borroso por la arena y lo único que pudo ver con claridad fue un tentáculo lo cual no tuvo que otra que rápidamente soltar su caracola y nadar rápidamente fuera del lugar pero el pulpo no tardo mucho en darse cuenta que el no esta ay viendo y yendo a por el a velocidad de pez vela siendo tan rápido como la luz a comparación al cangrejito que nadaba con sus pequeñas patitas pero justo cuando el pulpo lo iba agarrar justo pasa una ola envolviendo el agua entre los dos el cangrejito chocando con el pulpo siendo impulsado mas fácil fuera del agua rápidamente sale corriendo de lado a las plantas y enterrándose en la arena. A la mañana siguiente despertaría con la luz del sol y aun recuerda la escena del mar dándole mucho miedo volver quedándose en el mismo lugar aun aterrado, pasarían 1 2 y asta 3 días fuera del agua y aunque comía lo que encontraba por la arena no le era cómodo ya que extrañaba el mar y los depredadores nuevos como la gaviotas y pequeños dinos carroñeros que lo perseguían, no tuvo opción que salir solo en la noche para comer cuando todos los cangrejos dormían. Pasado el tiempo este



(continued)

se quedo mirando la luz de la luna que era luna llena tan hermosa y relajante tuvo una idea que fue crear otro refugio pero en debes de cargar con el seria crear su casa un hogar pues paso toda la noche reconectando y investigando el terreno encontrando materiales que si mezclaba con la arena se creaba cristalización pues comenzó a reunir troncos para almacenar agua dos troscos que eran ramas tecas la cual el cortaría a la medida para su cuerpo y colocaría como coral la decoración que le haría seria como coral para esa época era corales llamados rugose que parecen un baso con pelitos que botan siendo las anemonas que al tacto se esconden también haría sus flores que tenia como jardín en el mar que donde tenia su carazola que la flor que hace es el erizo de mar de lo que solía alimentarse también crearía una similitud a ello viéndose de esta forma siendo este su principal alimento anterior mente asta averse mudado fuera del agua lo cual seria difícil de volver a conseguirlo por lo cual se adapto a comer frutos y insectos que encontraba por la arena cambiando si dieta, en el procedimiento lo perseguiría un pequeño manifero que va detrás de el y el por istinto va a esconderse por unas raises secas expandando el ejambre de unos bichitos raros sintiendo vibraciones en su cuerpo pero no sentiría dano pero derpente ve como estos van por el mamifero siendo atacado , correido de estos insectos dándose cuenta del poder de esos bichitos después de tiempo volvería a su casita provisionar y continuaría recolectando materiales y comiendo frutas . después de un arduo trabajo lograría terminar su casa ah ora tocaba ponerle color pero no cualquier color si no el color azulado del mar y rojo de los corales que se iluminan con la luz del sol lo cual tubo la tarea de buscar arduamente frutos rojos que manchan mucho logrando encontrar con facilidad pero la aparte difícil era conseguir el color azul algo casi imposible mas para el cangrejo entonces se termino dando cuenta que el color que suelen expulsar los pulpos cuando se asustan es azul en esa época los pulpos soltaban tinta azul en debes de negro pero como un pequeño cangrejo asustaría un pulpo era algo imposible . y peligroso , entonces tubo una idea de como colectar la tinta pasaron horas y horas asta que fuera medio día y había colectado una almeja viva y un insecto de los que se topo hoy y ya tenia su casa terminada muy bonita pero le faltaba el color azul y no pensaba rendirse entonces tomo la decisión para buscar al pulpo



(continued)

algo que tanto miedo le daba peor claramente fue con una idea en mente para buscarlo no iba simplemente el con las manos bacias el había traído un insecto venenoso y peligroso que su veneno era mortal o causaba mucho dolor parecía como un camarón pero con agujones claramente el cangrejo era inmune por su esqueleto pero el pulpo no lo seria siendo hacia en busca del pulpo asta que llega cierta profundidad donde se acuerda que era su hogar y se queda a esperarlo pero lo que no savia era que el pulpo ya estaba ay camuflado y de un solo movimiento el cangrejito es atrapado con un tentáculo , el cangrejito tenia una almeja y el insecto era lo único que trajo para combatir el pulpo y aunque el pulpo no lo vio peligroso y lo iba a comer el cangrejo le acercó el insecto al tentáculo del pulpo este sintiendo un fuerte dolor un agujón que atravesó su piel y sintiendo el veneno que era tan doloroso como una bala este soltándolo al cangrejo y del dolor solitaria su tinta para salir corriendo , siendo victoria para el cangrejo abriendo la almeja y reconectando toda la tinta posible con la almeja para luego serrarla y volver a la superficie victorioso. Y hacia terminaría al fin su casa pero recordaría que no es buena idea vivir en el agua por que el pulpo lo puede atrapar desprevenido pues opto por vivir fuera del agua teniendo su casa terminada y acta para esos bichitos como teniendo pequeños ellos para que esos bichos vivan y coexistan con el cangrejo , dándole casa y ellos dándole protección y haci nacería una alianza natural de ambas dos especies,dando resultado la casa del cangrejo a esta obra de arte.



They yearn, they cry. Souls climbing from depths, clawing at others, screeching for something, a thing, an intangibility. A truth to the life of man? No, multiple desires; they want answers, they have questions, they want their fill. This blob, this mess of man, wishes to hear, to see this intangibility, and reap their reward. They say the truth is the answer to our questions. But what happens during, before, and after the journey do we see the truth, and continue life as we know it? Well, here's the truth. The truth has no form and will never begin its tangible state. All-seeing eye, it will never come to be. Why? Because humanity is human. They yearn for the truth, but what if it's not their truth? Will they accept it or reject that truth, deny what the truth comes to be?

This Paradox of Man, they will feed a truth that misguides them to seek a truth. But it's a lie they seek and call it a truth. The infinite souls leave their husks, racing to the finish line. Fighting each other to prove which truth reigns over all. When it's all a lie. They seek a truth, but the truth will always be missed, because to them it doesn't exist in their world, or it rejects them.



Are we all just born on earth a blank slate? Similar to how sand exists before the ocean wave? At the foundation of life, experiences help us grow and change. These experiences are like funnels that we stand in for only a short time. Their memories affect us and whatever we may have experienced might stay with us. Or be forgotten. Either forgotten, or remembered, that memory has changed the person in some way. Then our emotions slowly start flowing into each other as liquid to dye, as barnacles would to the ocean. People affect other people and slowly mold a person into who they are. The memories that we once lived, the funnels of experiences that we once stood in, fade into emotions and then into expression and growth. What is the meaning of these funnels? Why do we enter and then leave? Do we experience certain memories and challenges so that if someone were to find themselves in the same funnel that is challenging, we might be able to help? What is so beautiful about memory, time and space, is that each experience is unique and we are not stuck in a funnel forever. There is always room to grow and actively create memories that will bring us joy. As the time flows, the ocean may come and bring us the peace we have been waiting for.





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