

MULTISPECIES CITIES:

A WRITING WORKSHOP

01	INTRODUCTION
02	CHAITHRASRI KUMAR
04	CHRISTOPHER KALTENBACH
06	DALIA HAMATI
08	FATIMA ALYOUSEFI
10	RACHEL
12	REEM
14	RICHI BHATIA
18	SAMAA AHMED

This zine is the result of a collective experiment in writing beyond the human. Led by Dr. Neha Vora, Multispecies Cities: A Writing Workshop invited participants to imagine the city as seen, felt, and lived by its non-human inhabitants. Inspired by the Multispecies Cities reading group series at Jameel Library in 2024, this workshop emerged in response to the engagement of its participants—curious, energetic, and eager to create.

Through guided exercises in writing, storytelling, and observation, participants considered the layered presence of non-human life in urban environments. What does a city look like from the perspective of an ant, a persistent tree, or a barnacle in the creek? How do these urban dwellers experience time, change, and movement? The works gathered here are the creative responses to these questions—a collection of voices that reimagine the city as a shared space of multispecies entanglement.

This compilation of writing and other creative works serves as a documentation of the work produced within the workshop. We invite you to read these pieces with the openness and curiosity that shaped their creation.

Shadowland

First came the vibrations, clunky and grating. They spread through the air and the Creek's waters. The barnacle colonies, established along the Creek's embankment, felt them course through the concrete they had so securely latched themselves onto. They wondered, in their own mysterious way, whether this was an attempt to dislodge them from their abode.



Barnacle colonies on the Creek embankment.

Amidst the endless construction activity all around them, their excited gurgling (as was their way), inaudible to humans at the best of times, now seemed to not even reach the neighbouring colonies along the embankment. These unnatural drilling sounds gave the colony a newfound tolerance for the seagulls' squawking. They also missed the normalcy of the vibrations of the Creek; the boats running on schedule, birdsong punctuating the air, occasional human voices etc. The drilling convulsed the colony with excitement and fear. After a while, the convulsions gave way to resignation. The vibrations became more of a physical problem than an existential one. They would endure, for they were hardy beings.

The grating vibrations lessened after a while. However, the colony noticed a gradual drop in the temperature around them. The concrete embankment, their eternal abode, seemed to stay cool during the day and night. They were used to nearly cooking in their calcite cocoons during the daytime and sighing gurgles of relief in the cooler night air. They also seemed to spend more time in the shadows. Sunlight seemed to only filter through in shards; something/someone invisible seemed to hover over the colony. The long cold fingers of the shadows seemed to obscure more of the light as the days went by. Amidst all this change, it was a relief to the colony that the water currents still flowed the way they always did.



Barnacle colonies under one of the Creek bridges.

One day, all the clunking and grating stopped, and the shadow engulfed the entire colony. The change seemed permanent, and so it was. Unknown to them, the thing that the shadow belonged to, so ominous in its arrival, was a new bridge constructed over the Creek.

The barnacles, ever adaptable and resilient, continue to mysteriously gurgle in the shadows.

Jet Stream Awakening: a Carpenter bee's positive anemotaxis incident

by C.M.Kaltenbach

The entire body violently reverberates. Oh! The temperature has dropped. Light slowly fills two ocelli, then the third, shape begins to be given to my condition. While no plant or fellow XF (*Xylocopa fenestrata*) can be identified with the large compound lenses, flanking either side of my head, these hairy apertures aggressively bristle against contradictory air currents. The occasional pollen temporarily affixes itself. This is not the dusty, terrestrial tumbling I once recovered from...

I do not recognize the frequency of my beating wings. Can they be moving at a rate that I can't register? No. They are immobile, limp. Wait... my orientation? Upside down? With the thorax, role. How can it be that I have gone airborne? At what altitude is this space? Suspended in a weightless, cool, damp terrain with no familiar features, I am adrift in an alien scape.

Tumble, tumble, I dizzily propel, as the attempt to correct, first with the left wing, then the right, fails. OUCH! What the? OOFFF, there, again, a dull force against my abdomen. On either side I catch the swift passing of large beige objects. If I am not on land, then why are silicon boulders rushing over and past me? Must try to avoid.. OOF, not again! Over there, is that an AF (*Apis florea*/dwarf honeybee)? What a thrashing it's taking. The shimmering surface that was almost directly below is now moving away. In the distance, slowly approaching, an emanating, cubic void.

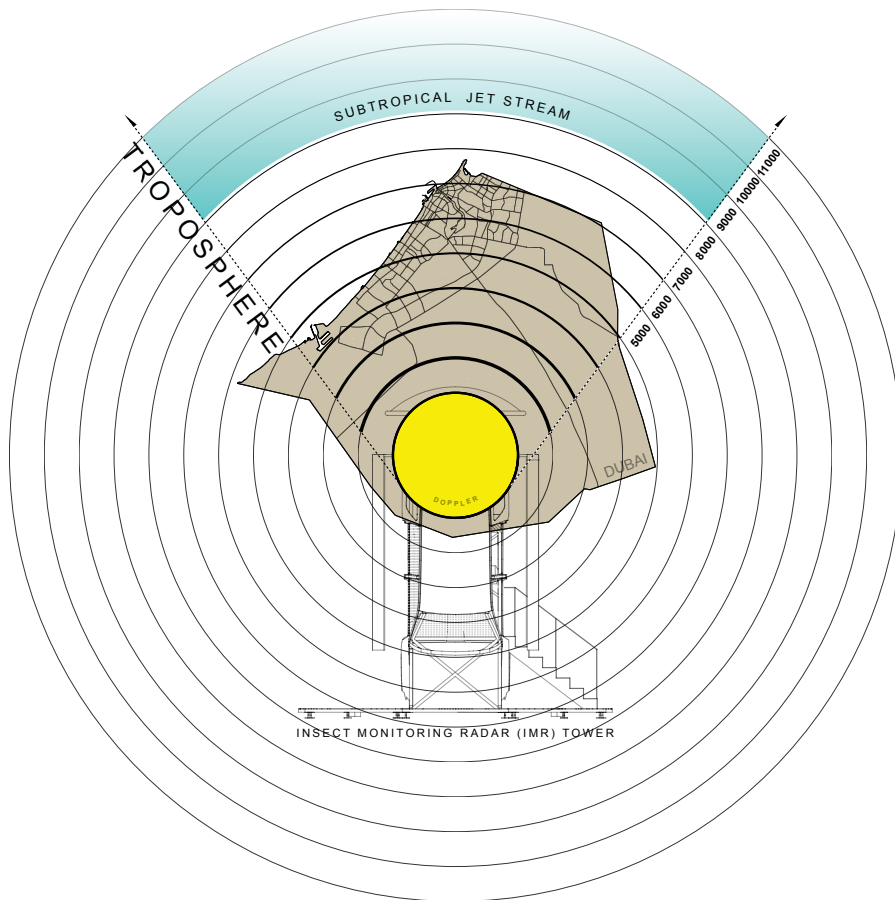
Is this what is meant to be engulfed by the Haboob? Older XFs warned of their violent attacks but assured us that we would sense their approach, allowing for the invacuation impulse to send us retreating to the deep hallow in the tree stump at the edge, near the tidal inlet.

At just over 9,000 meters, an insect monitoring radar identifies targets.

Reverberation echoes through these organs, where in my core is this being generated? Abdomen billows, then contracts, looping to an involuntary pulse, escaping out of my head, then reentering, repeatedly recharged... You want me to do what? Share what? "Oshtak-a-flashtak...sasbath, nastak." Is that pistil trying to communicate? Really! It too was involuntarily carried up, into this mess? These hairs that crown dare to transmit but won't hesitate to receive. How to respond? Let it go. Release.

Descent has begun. Solitary. It is a velocity the cradles this weight.

What new world soon receives me.



23-02-2025
Multispecies Writing Workshop
Dalia Hamati

A Nonverbal Encounter with a Carpenter Bee at Tarabot Interspecies Pavilion

It comes out of nowhere, shiny and black with a hint of metallic blue, furiously ascending from behind the untreated steel, its silence curious relative to its size. I stop to observe its frantic flight path.

Bee: Pollen, I sense pollen on this Saltcedar here. I want it, I need it. whereisit whereisit whereisit whereisit

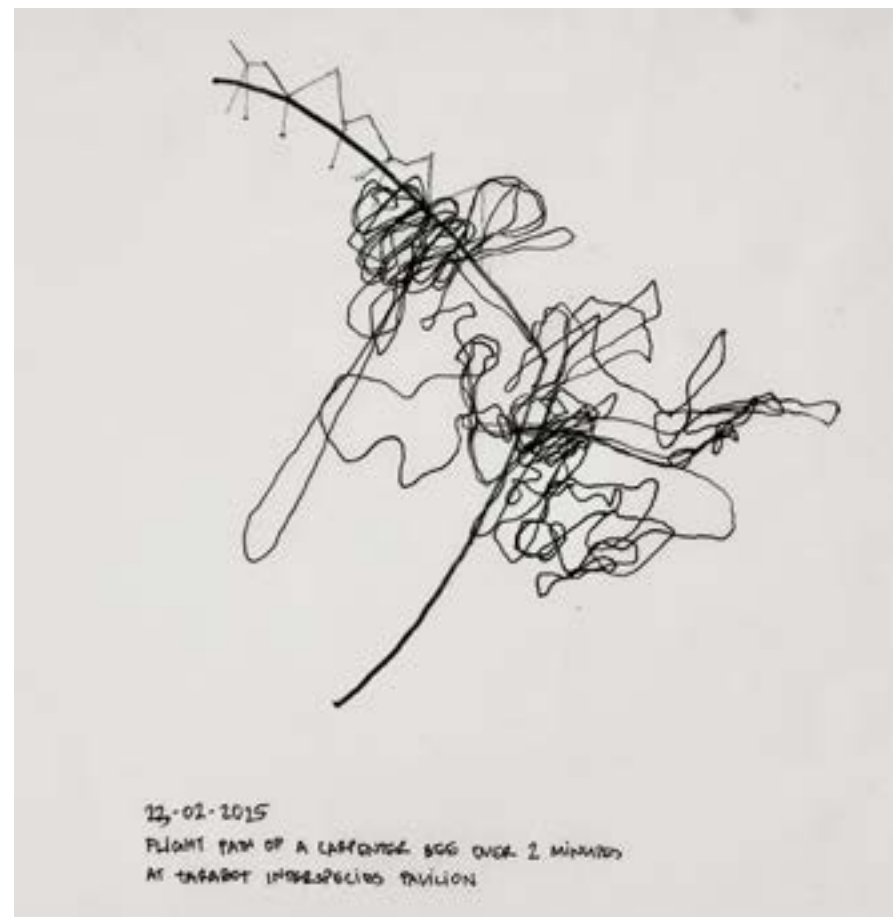
Me: It's right here. Why are you flying so erratically, can't you see it?

Bees: Is that a desert cotton plant? I haven't seen one of those here in years, ever since they laid those cement tiles. Maybe there's pollen where those dwarf bees are. whereisit whereisit whereisit whereisit whereisit

Me: Woah you're actually really loud when you get so close like that. You sound frightening, like some sort of military drone. My adrenaline just spiked. Do you perceive me as a threat? Do you sting? Look, you have a friend. Why did you accelerate when it joined you? Are you collaborators or competitors?

Bee: Get out of my way (shooting up into the air at top speed before diving back down again). whereisit whereisit whereisit whereisit whereisit

Me: There are many birds here. Aren't you afraid of being eaten? Is that why you fly so erratically? Your sudden changes in direction are making my head spin. My brain feels sluggish, I can't keep up with you. Maybe if I draw your movements I can train my eyes to follow you.

[illegible]

Me: I have been drawing you for two minutes and you relentlessly repeat the same movements over and over and over again, like some sort of senseless machine. Why aren't you landing?

Bee: whereisit whereisit whereisit whereisit whereisit

Me: This is boring and it's too hot. I'm going back inside. The Sodom's Apple is over there.

Bee: whereisit whereisit whereisit whereisit whereisit

The Web Unwoven

A bloodcurdling scream echoes through the room. I watch, frozen in horror, as my mother, legs flailing in the air, screeches out in pain. Another spray of poison smothers her, its acrid chemical stench stabbing through my senses. She convulses once more, gives a final twitch, then falls still.

Gasping, I jolt awake, my body trembling. Nausea churns in my stomach, but the shot of pain that runs through it reminds me that there's nothing left to retch. When was the last time I ate? Moonlight filters through the window, silver and cold. My mouth is dry, brittle as dead leaves. I push up onto all eight limbs. Food. I need food.

Slowly, I crawl along the windowsill of the basement that I retreated to after my mother's murder. Mustering what little strength I have, I force myself to spin a web. Squeezing out the silk thread through the spinneret on my abdomen, I pull it out with my hind leg and carefully stretch each thread into place. Every movement sends an excruciating pain through my body as I fight through the fatigue and hunger, but I keep weaving. At last, a gossamer web glistens in the moonlight, fragile yet strong, stretched across the bottom corner of the windowsill. Now I wait in anticipation. As I do, the ache of loneliness settles into my exoskeleton. Heavy under the weight of grief, my eyelids slowly fall shut as I wait...

A tremor jolts me awake. The web quivers, vibrations rippling outward. My heart pounds as my many eyes lock onto a struggling fly, its wings thrashing against the silk. A sob catches in my throat—relief, joy. My stomach clenches, desperate, as I scuttle forward, fangs poised. All of a sudden, a burst of light flashes across the room, and I shrink back. Two towering figures—The Half-Limbed—step inside.

"This room is so musty. Open up a window."

One of them approaches where I'm perched, letting out a groan as they recoil, their face twisting in disgust.

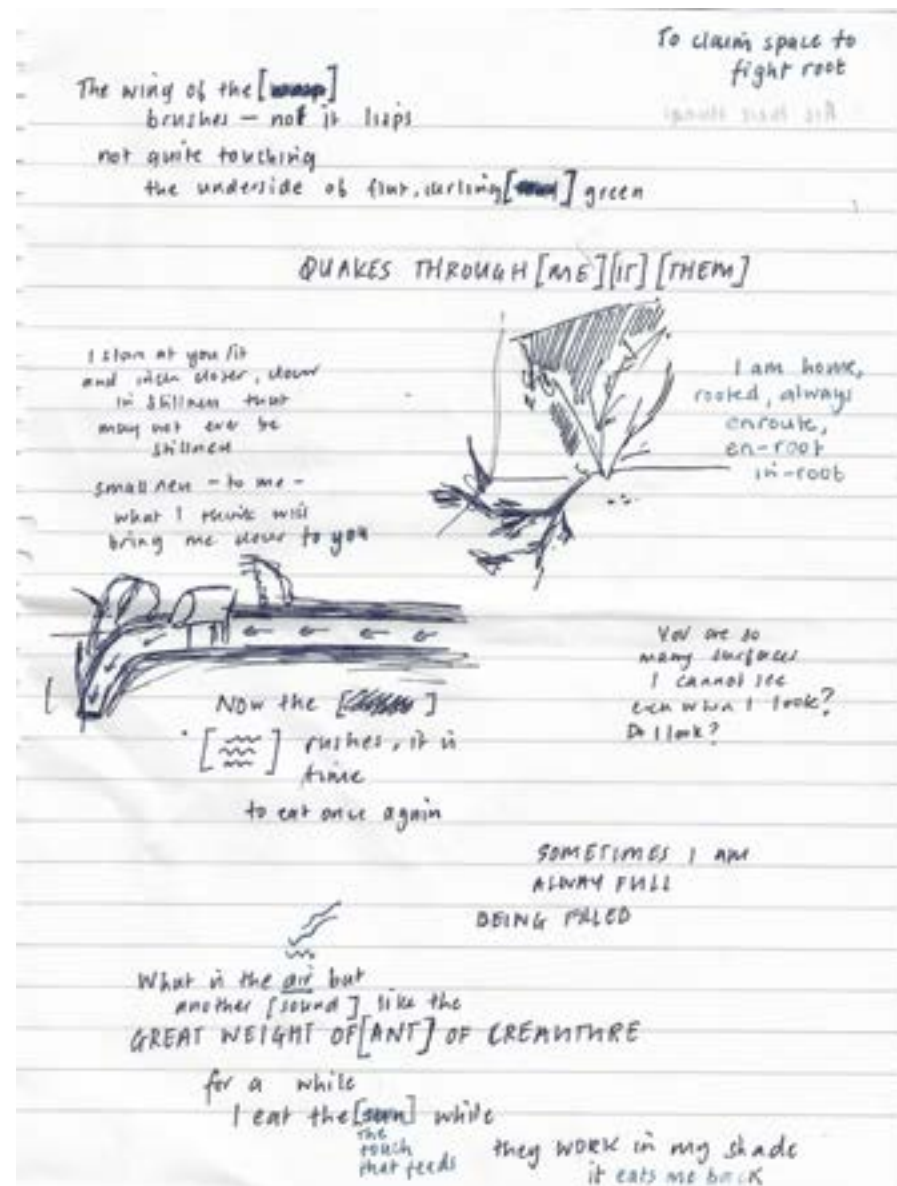
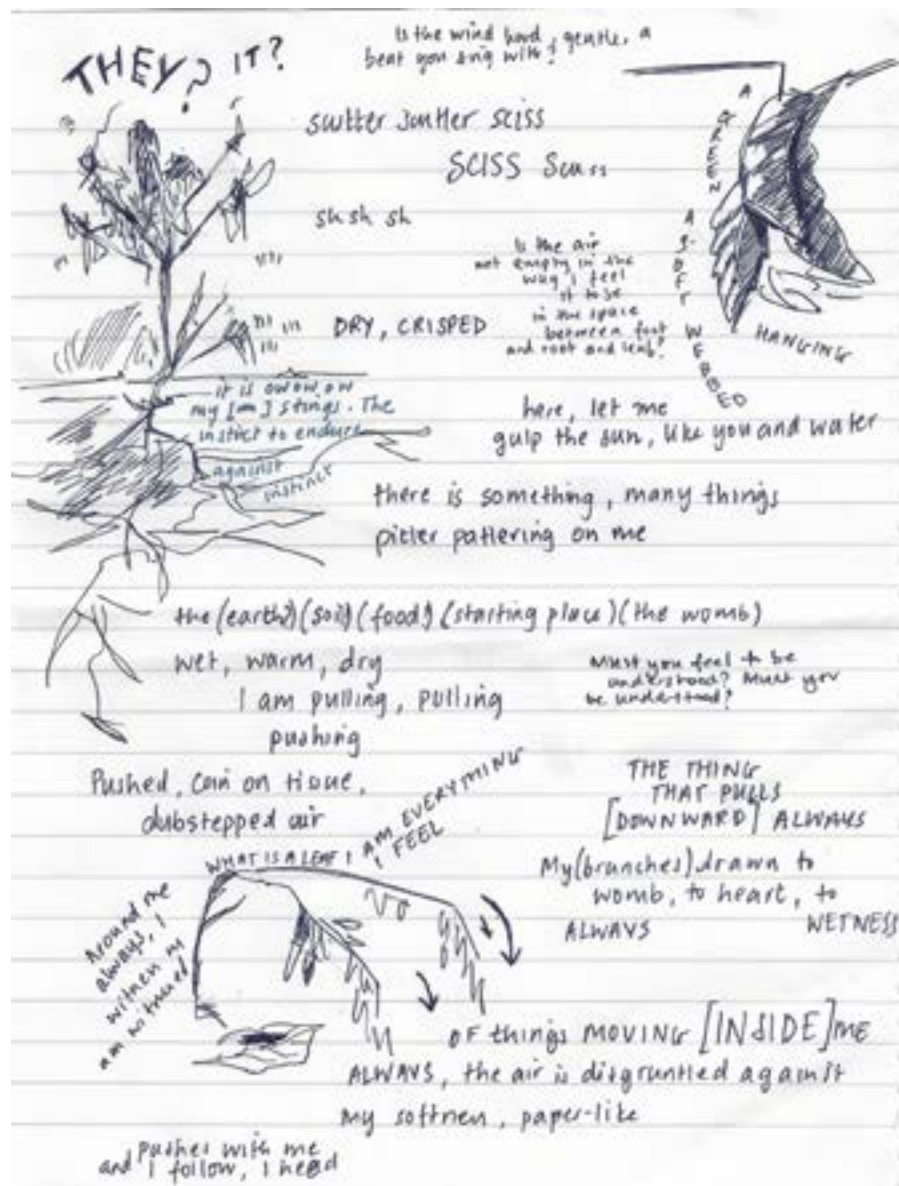
"Ugh. A spider." They step back, voice filled with revulsion.

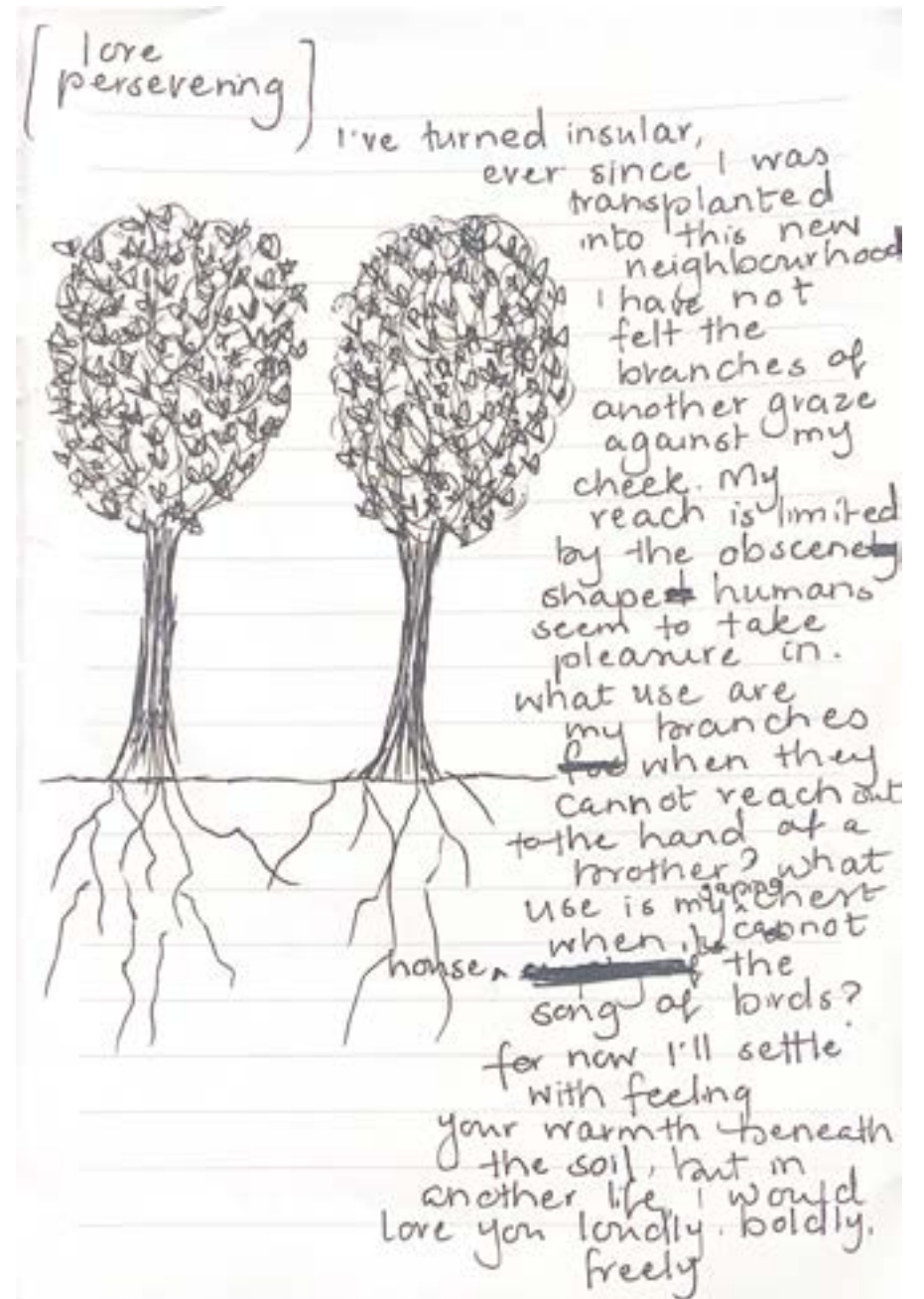
"Kill it." Another voice chimes in, indifferent.

A shadow in the shape of a book looms over me, growing darker. A gust of wind rushes past me as my world is reduced to a single searing pain. Agony splinters through my body—my exoskeleton shatters, my legs jerk in a final, futile twitch. Darkness floods my vision, swallowing me whole. The burning in my chest fades into quiet, and for the first time in my life, I feel something like peace.

Then, nothing.









Antevasin

I was a fish with scales, the one that Richi uses
Once we are brought out of our homes, prepared to be devoured by tongues and
teeth through your hands.
We are descaled,

Teible – life in each plate
A fish, a watermelon, a yellow oak - a green star restaurant

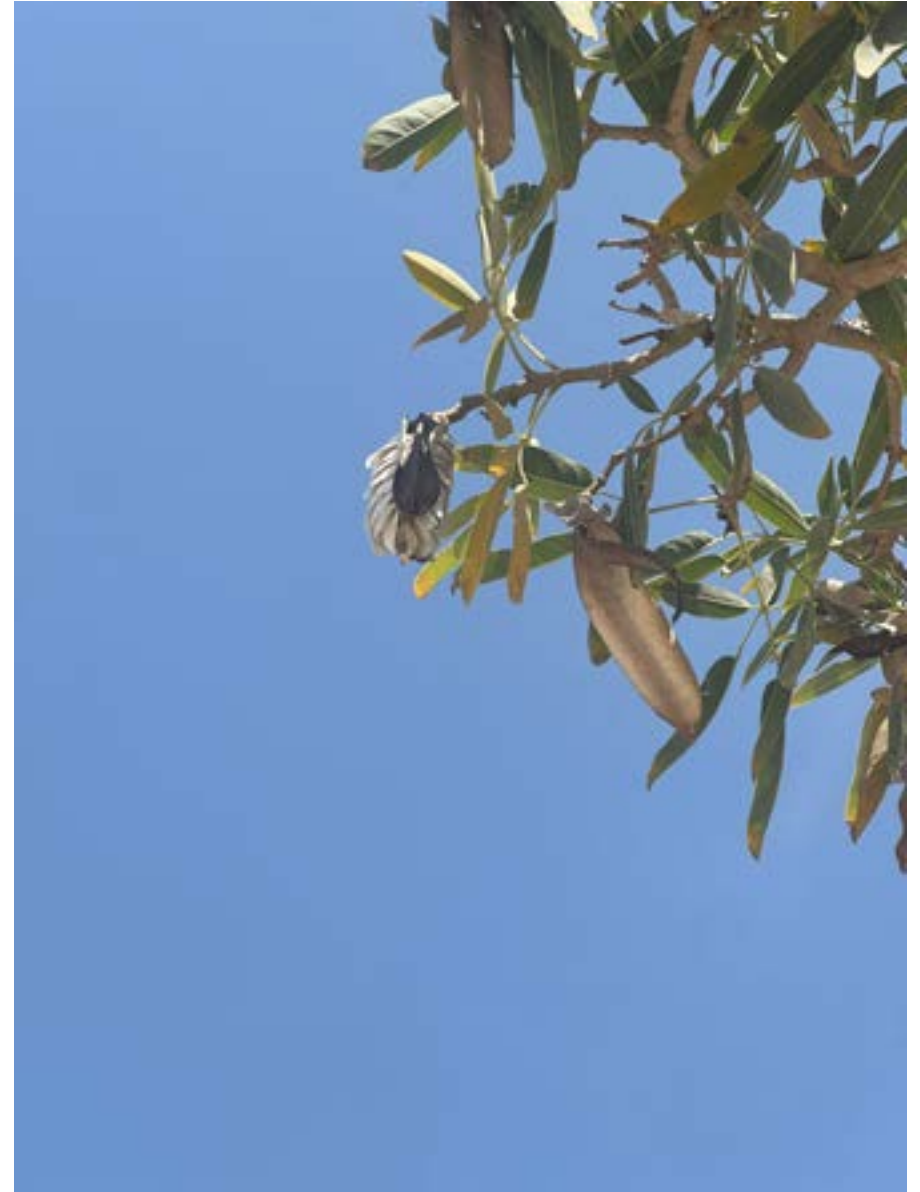
I swam parallel to Teible
And one day I was being prepared to be at the table

perhaps for a small girl, for a collector, for an artist,
Or perhaps for an anthropologist – who would look into my flesh and cooked eyes and
still think of me and my species – as bodies

Somehow, even after I was ingested
A line of voice and eyes remained

My remains mixed with others; morphed and turned us into a manure used for plants
and so was born *Tabebuia*
And its white flowers
And its yellow flowers

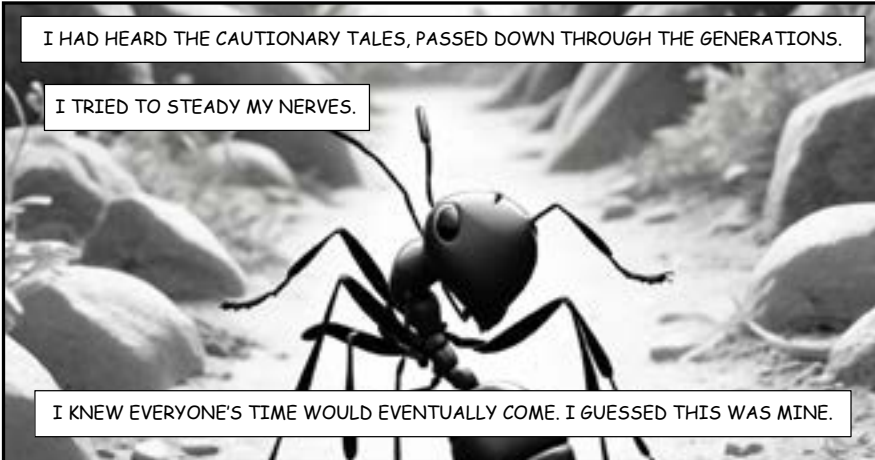
Now instead of a fish and its skin, I am a flower
I grow like a small cluster of fish scales and eventually one by one we
orchestrate ourselves to fall
One by one
One by one
One by one
Only to be again be one with the soil and the ants
Sometimes looking like a snack, sometimes like a new born crab
And sometimes like an *antevasin*
- The one who lives in the liminal space and at the border of the two worlds.



IT STARTED WITH AN EARTHQUAKE. OR - IN FACT - SOMETHING MUCH WORSE. THE SOFT THUDS WERE COMING CLOSER. THE HOT, SANDY GROUND WAS SHAKING. I TRIED TO BE CALM AND HOLD STRONG AMONGST THE CHAOS.

I HAD HEARD THE CAUTIONARY TALES, PASSED DOWN THROUGH THE GENERATIONS.

I TRIED TO STEADY MY NERVES.



I KNEW EVERYONE'S TIME WOULD EVENTUALLY COME. I GUESSED THIS WAS MINE.

I HAD HEADED THE WARNINGS. I STAYED CLOSE TO THE LEAVES, UNDER THE SAFETY OF THE WELL-MANICURED SHRUBS.

BUT THE BEASTS HAD STILL FOUND ME



WHERE HAD THEY COME FROM?

THEIR CRIES WERE HIGH PITCHED. THEIR SOUNDS WERE DIFFERENT THAN THE ONES I HAD HEARD FROM THE CREATURES DRESSED IN GREEN, WHO BRANDISHED SHARP WEAPONS, BUT TOILED AWAY SILENTLY EACH DAY.

THESE BEASTS - SMALLER - SEEMED TO SQUEAL IN DELIGHT.

ABSOLUTE SAVAGES! DID THEY ENJOY THE SLAUGHTER?

I WAS FROZEN IN SHOCK AND FEAR. THE CLAMORING PAUSED.



THE GIANTS APPEARED ABOVE ME, SO LARGE I COULD ONLY SEE THEIR HOOVES. THERE WERE TWO PINK ONES, AND TWO PURPLE. THEY WIELDED A LARGE, CIRCULAR ORB.

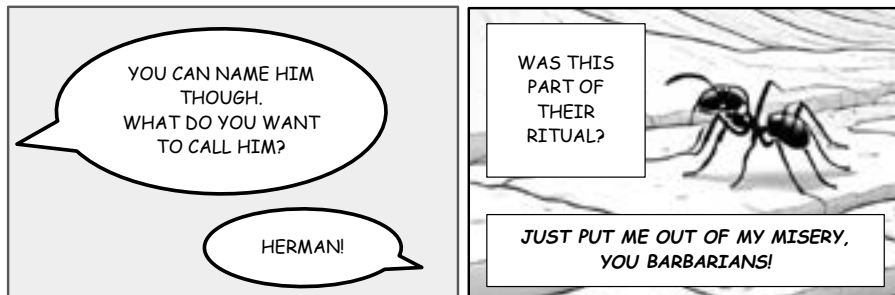


FUZZY! PASS ME THE MAGNIFYING GLASS! I WANT TO SEE HIM!

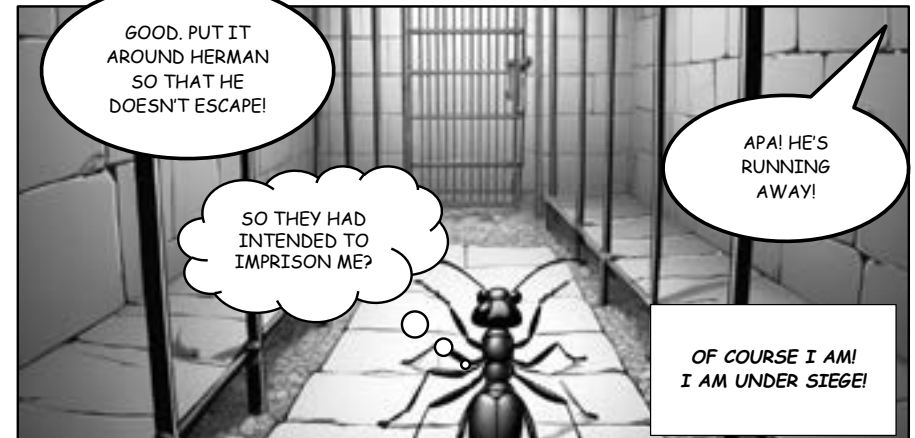
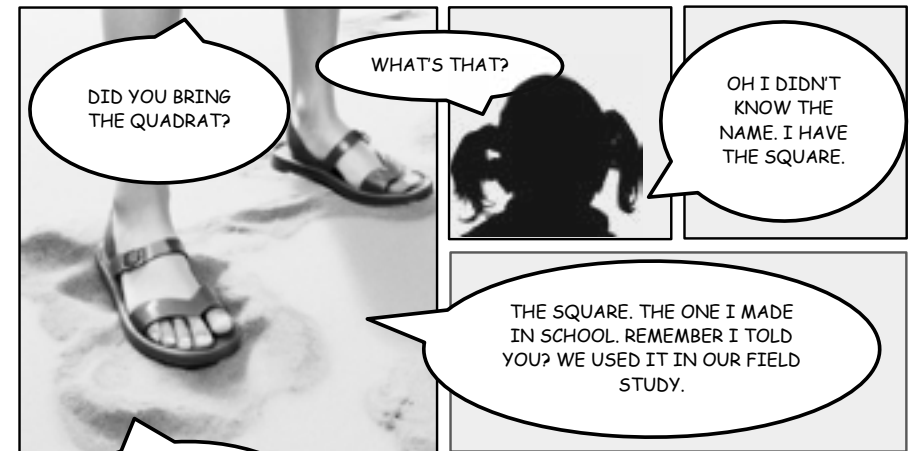
WHOA! LOOK, APA!

WHAT WAS THIS SORCERY?!





THIS TORTUROUS GAME WAS WAS SO MUCH MORE CRUEL THAN I HAD ANTICIPATED.



MY EARLIER TASK OF CRUMB RETRIEVAL SEEMED LIKE A LIFETIME AGO. MY ONLY PRIORITY NOW WAS SURVIVAL! THE HOOVES LUNGED FORWARD. THEIR SHADOWS CONSUMED THE GROUND AROUND ME. WITH EVERY OUNCE OF STRENGTH, I SPRINTED FOR MY LIFE. I WOULD NOT DIE TODAY!

FOR FAZAA, MY FIRST RESEARCH ASSISTANT, AND FAVORITE COLLABORATOR

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