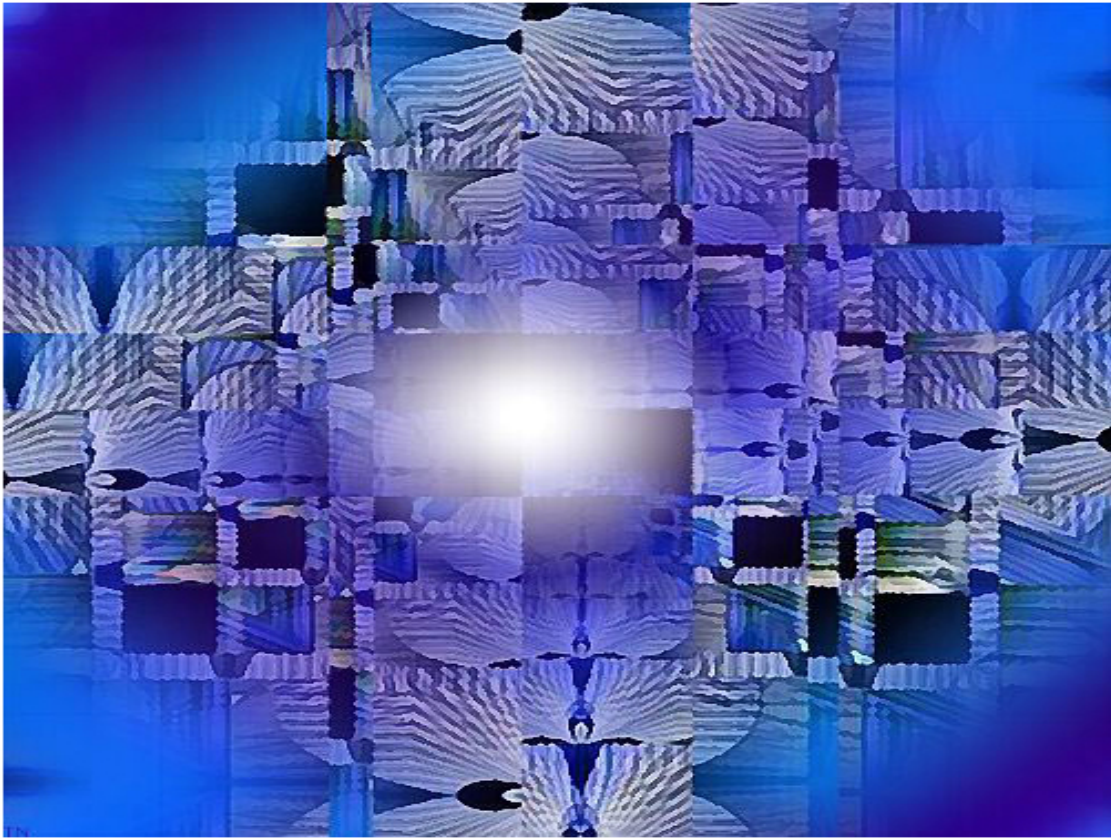


FRACTURED CORALS, FRAGMENTED MEANINGS:

An Anthozoa Elegy



In an artsy café several computer screens cast digital images across its stucco walls. On one projection was a semi-cubist image of mushroom corals in a field of deep, cold cobalt. It looked like a vanished reef with broken geometries in a drowned maritime garden.

For a few seconds, no one spoke. The group simply stared at the image briefly while deciding what to order as espresso machines hissed near them. The smell of aromatic coffees blended with unusual perfumes before vanishing into the air.

Philyra leaned forward, her sharp gaze cutting through the quiet as she turned toward Andrei. "What does this image have to do with coral reefs?" she asked, her impatience carefully veiled beneath a polite tone. "Is it even tethered to the breathing reality of coral—or are we simply projecting our own preferences onto a pretty blue picture?"

Andrei leaned closer to the screen, then hesitated. He was uncertain whether Philyra wanted an answer, an argument, or merely another opportunity to dismantle somebody's interpretation. "Well... some people might see these coral forms as symbols of our fractured civilization," he said. "Others might see nothing but abstract geometries adrift in a blue wash." Andrei turned back to Philyra, mildly curious about her reaction. "What about you, Philyra? What do you see?"

Philyra furrowed her brows as her index finger slowly tracing the rim of her coffee mug. "The deep blue tones certainly feel maritime," she mused. "They suggest briny seascapes and submerged things." She paused. "They also remind me of crushed scallop shells — I sense something powdered, pale, and brittle beneath all that blue."

Although she had nothing useful to say, Ellesha offered this cursory comment, "Chemically, seashells share the same calcium as hard coral. In a sense our bones are not that different." She smiled awkwardly. "Sorry. I'm afraid I don't have a poetic mind. I am merely stating things you already know."

Elijah raised a single skeptical eyebrow. A crooked smirk slowly surfaced from his mouth. "Don't you think this is commentary on capitalism and consumer culture?"

Ellesha laughed. "That's one possible interpretation." She reached for a lemon wedge and squeezed it over her drink. A sharp citrus scent briefly cut through the sweet smell of espresso.

"There are a thousand ways to look at any object," she added. "A coral can be a creature, a colony, a skeleton, a symbol, a commodity, a casualty—or merely digital content on a screen." She watched the lemon juice bead and fall. "What we see says as much about ourselves as it does about whatever we are seeing."

For a moment, nobody answered. The cobalt coral objects continued to glow. Fractured. Beautifully incomplete. Perhaps the reef was within from the image. And somewhere beyond the café's walls, beyond the concrete streets and bright advertisements, real coral reefs continued their slow, silent struggle beneath the sea. No one at the table could see them. Yet everyone, in one way or another, was intently looking.

NOTE: This piece was partially generated with AI tools; human editing was then applied.

- T Newfields

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