

Abstract

*OFFERINGS*

By

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*Offerings* is a sculptural body of work which conveys my personal experiences and emotional modes of being. The meditative and cathartic nature of the process of making these works along with their fetish and shrine-like formal qualities are intended to give them a spiritual essence. *Offerings* embodies an arc of intangible feelings ranging from fear, anxiety, and desperation to understanding, acceptance, and overcoming. These are expressed through the creation of small-scale figurative sculptures in relation to one another and to their architectonic settings.



*OFFERINGS*

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Master of Fine Arts in Wood Design

By

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## INTRODUCTION

This body of work sprang from my desire to materialize and memorialize personal feelings and experiences through small-scale figurative sculptures in a narrative format. A supplemental goal was to create a cathartic and meditative experience through the act of repetitively carving miniature human figures out of scraps of beautiful wood. I feel that the scale of the figures conveys a sense of intimacy that is appropriate to the emotional subject matter. This intimacy is experienced both by myself as the maker through the physical interaction of carving them, and by the viewer who is drawn in close to view them. Religious sculptural forms, fetish figures, and contemporary figurative sculptors' work serve as inspiration. Emotional experiences are conveyed through the spatial relationships of figurative sculptures and their architectonic settings. Made for the purpose of remembrance, I call them *Offerings*.

Composing these works has been deeply self-revealing. This form of figurative narrative expression was uncharted territory for me, so I began by carving a population of characters. There are many different steps to the process of creating these works, but it is the act of carving the figures, one tiny sliver at a time, that I find to be relaxing and meditative. Many of the figures in these works were carved over a period of a few months when I had fallen into a deep depression and found solace in this activity. In my small studio space, with mellow lighting and instrumental music playing, I sat and carved these tiny people for hours at a time. It was with these figures that I began to compose narratives. When figures were completed, I would place them along the shelves lining my studio space. It became something like a large dollhouse. The scale of the figures reminds me of board game pieces and this is similar to how I interacted with them. The act was reminiscent of my childhood, playing with my brother's little army men figurines. Personal experiences, an interest in the construction of mythologies, and my philosophical attitude were driving forces behind the development of these narratives. They are

dictated by placement, grouping and proximity. Although some of the final arrangements were intentional, others were born out of a sense of spontaneity and random placement. Moving the figures around boards of hardwood that became floors and walls, a multitude of narratives unfolded. A slight change in orientation or spacing would completely alter the feeling of the scene. For a time the narratives were fluid and ever changing projections of my mood, mental state, and personal relationships. Setting them into a definitive placement solidified the essence of a particular moment in time.

The small scale of the figures helps to shape the feeling of the scenes. In the sculpture *Love Nest* the scale creates a sense of intimacy. The viewer is invited to move in close. The small scale of the figures in *Gone Wandering* creates a sense of vastness in the space around them. The scale of the figures makes them monumental in relation to their surroundings and also emphasizes the magnitude of the emotions.

Wood is used as the sole material for a variety of reasons. The physical act of carving wood is meditative. I use an array of different species of wood. The characteristics of different species of wood vary greatly and I enjoy feeling the grain in my hand and with the blade of my carving tool. The tactile experience is pleasing to me.

The symbolic qualities of a living and ephemeral material such as wood lend themselves to the spiritual nature of the objects created. I relate the beauty of the natural wood to the beauty of human nature. The work deals with the struggle of the human condition. Wood will deteriorate over time and I am at peace with that. The ephemeral quality of this living material is a celebration of mortality.

## HISTORY AND INFLUENCES

Figurative sculptors throughout the ages influence formal qualities of these works. The small scale is inspired by fetish figures such as The Venus of Willendorf and votive offering figurines found in the ruins of ancient Greece. Similar small carved figures are also found in nearly every continent of the world. These objects are perceived to have a spiritual nature. From my Catholic upbringing, I recall the small devotional statues of saints found within the church and in my family home in a similar way.

The elongated and stark renderings of the figures and the psychological interplay between them are inspired by a few key sources. Donatello's marble statues of prophets carved for niches in the Campanile of the Cathedral of Florence were carved in a harsh and simplistic manner in order for the viewer to read the expressions from sixty feet below. When these statues were in their original niches on the Campanile (they have since been relocated to a museum space) there was a psychological interplay between them through their gazes and expressions. My figures work in a similar way on a miniscule scale.

The Swiss sculptor Alberto Giacometti was influential on my work. I grew up in Pittsburgh, near The Carnegie Museum of Art, which is home to one of his large elongated walking figures. The presence of this sculpture beckons me. It seemed like a charred man walking across the room in agony, but with a sense of determination. It was later that I was introduced to the small-scale figurative sculptures of Giacometti, which place miniscule figures on large bases, giving them a sense of monumentality.

The works of Spanish sculptor Juan Muñoz were also an inspiration, particularly his *Conversation Piece* series. These installations feature figures, which are slightly smaller than

human scale, engaged in psychological interactions through gesture and the direction of their gaze. The bottom half of their bodies are bulbous bag-like structures which convey movement through slight shifts in weight and balance.

My sculptural work is conceptually informed by a variety of literary and philosophical sources. The goal is to make art with meaning beyond pure aesthetics and in doing so I decided to take on what I view as the ultimate subject matter, the meaning of my life and existence.

I was raised Catholic but later rejected that as I began to explore other spiritual and philosophical views. Starting with the myths of the ancient Greeks and Romans and further expanding to various cultures of the world I became interested in the stories that people have come up with in order to explain the unknown. The work of American philosopher and mythologist Joseph Campbell was influential in this sense. Campbell engaged in studies of comparative mythology in which he pointed out common themes and storylines within mythological traditions of cultures across the world. He believed that these stories served as allegorical representations of the human life cycle. Campbell described what he referred to as the 'monomyth' or 'the hero's journey' in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell points out 17 stages he found to be common among the world's many myths, which can be simplified into three sections: Departure, Initiation, and Return. My work does not follow Campbell's format, but thematically it is about my spiritual awakening. However, this body of work conveys a disjointed spiritual journey through my psyche, more like the literary works of Franz Kafka and Albert Camus, which have had a large impact on my thinking. These Existentialist authors presented the world in a different light than anything else I had read. Kafka's stories don't follow the traditional format of beginning, middle, and end with the protagonist ultimately resolving some issue. Kafka throws you into the middle of a strange and foreboding situation with no explanation and leave you feeling uneasy and confused. He makes

these situations tolerable and even enjoyable with absurd and comical elements. His stories feel the way my dreams do, where time and places fluctuate and absurd situations unfold while I accept everything as being totally normal.

Aspects of Albert Camus' essay *The Myth of Sisyphus* are expressed in several works in this series. In it, he lays out an agnostic viewpoint and highlights the paradoxical absurdity of man's innate desire for clarity in an unforgiving world that offers none. Camus' 'absurd hero' confronts and embraces this paradox as an affirmation of life.

## ARRANGEMENT

*Offerings* is a sculptural body of work, which expresses scenes that glimpse into my personal 'absurd hero's journey'. Although my journey has only just begun, there have been a multitude of small story arcs along the way. These works are scenes from different aspects of my life, including my spiritual and philosophical development, emotional health, and personal relationships with my boyfriend and family. They are not arranged by the chronological order in which they were made, but in a quasi-narrative format that splices together scenes from multiple stories into one narrative. The first ones presented deal with beginnings and departures. In the middle are various trials, tribulations, and confrontations. The works at the end highlight resolutions and achieving peace.



**Plate 1:** *Gone Wandering*, 8" x 1" x 5", cherry and mahogany

## GONE WANDERING

*Gone Wandering* references Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. The work consists of a moving line of figures that graduate in size from smallest to largest, arranged in a wavering line, wandering across an empty space on the wall. The figures are looking around in different directions with no clear destination. The first chapter of the essay deals with the 'Paradox of the Absurd', which is about searching in vain for something which cannot be obtained. Camus states "The divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" (Gould and Mulvany 602). The Absurd is having a desire for understanding and clarity in a world of chaos. It is the search for an objective value system and order where there is none to be found. It is an outward search for meaning that can only be found from within. *Gone Wandering* expresses this absurdity.

The figures in this installation were made during the period of meditative carving during which I made around 30 similar figures out of various types of wood. Most of these figures have facial expressions that seem perplexed and lost, which is how I was feeling at the time. This group was edited down to the 10 figures made out of cherry and mahogany for *Gone Wandering*. These have a similar warm tone, and I wanted this group to be cohesive. Although the work consists of both male and female figures, all are expressions of myself.



**Plate 2:** *Revolt*, 15 1/2" x 29" x 4", canary wood, mahogany, poplar, walnut

## REVOLT

*Revolt* is about a personal acknowledgement of mortality as an affirmation of life. It recalls a point in my life in which I began to question societal standards and religious traditions. This work also refers to *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Camus deals with the anxiety and isolation one feels with the realization that values must come from within the existing individual and not from an outward objective source. Camus goes on to say that one must live in constant revolt of desire for clarity by not giving in to blind faith and conformity. The essay also addresses the feeling of absurdity a person is confronted with concerning the inevitability of death or as he puts it, "...in face of the cruel mathematics that command our condition" (Oaklander, 340). In a section titled *Absurdity and Suicide*, Camus addresses the issue of suicide in the face of this harsh realization as the only truly serious philosophical problem. He concludes that suicide does not resolve the issue; it only rushes one toward the source of anxiety in an attempt to negate it (Gould and Mulvaney 601). One must revolt against their desire for clarity and embrace the absurdity of existence. The revolt from conformity and the absurd is liberating in that freedom is felt through existentially free choices (600).

The work consists of a wall hung ship-like form made out of walnut. There are small figures lined up on the deck facing a structure on the left, which resembles a gallows and also a cross. The gallows represents the harsh reality of mortality and contemplation of suicide, and the cross represents the philosophical suicide of conforming to a religion. The figures graduate in height in a wavy pattern and are more tightly spaced toward the gallows. The left side of the cross's horizontal beam is fractured at the end. Below this, the hull of the ship is a long narrow box that angles downward to the right on both ends to imply forward movement. The ends are open, creating a tunnel. A running female figure emerges from the back of the tunnel. She is engaging in the revolt.



**Plate 3:** *Frenzy*, 36" x 6" x 5 1/2", ash, canary wood, cherry, mahogany, walnut



**Plate 4:** *Frenzy*, detail, 36" x 6" x 5 1/2", ash, canary wood, cherry, mahogany, walnut

## FRENZY

*The Frenzy* group was carved early into this exploration at a time when I was trying to figure out what direction my work was going. Their arrangement is an expression of having difficulties focusing, and being easily distracted by new ideas and interpretations. Such has been the case in composing some of these sculptures; I am constantly reimagining them. It is about the frustration of indecision. The work features a group of figures on a small platform, running into one another and scattering in all directions. The motion is implied through their directional bases and gestures, inspired by Juan Muñoz's *Conversation Piece* figures. They are carved out of a variety of wood creating an aesthetically busy experience. The platform rests on top of a structure of various planks of different types of wood jutting downward to a thick piece of walnut that rests upon a small square panel of walnut. This base further enhances the feeling of motion; blasting up and away from the bottom like a jet stream. The contrasting tones of the wood used are visually dynamic and also add to this feeling of unrest. This sense of restless confusion can be applied to many areas of my life, including my spiritual journey and search for meaning.



**Plate 5:** *Cavern*, 30" x 7 1/4" x 11", walnut

## CAVERN

My studio space is a small room with no windows and a tall ceiling. Being in this room for hours on end became maddening in times of anxiety and depression. *Cavern* is about feeling mentally trapped in a hole or a cave as a metaphor for depression, and how the architecture of my studio space contributed to this feeling. Boards of walnut with blue stain fungus streaks were utilized in this work. This does not cause structural cellular damage to the tree as decay fungi do, but it does stain the wood a bluish-gray color (Hoadley 40). Blue stain streaks are used to represent feelings of depression. I associate blue with sadness, for instance blues music or feeling blue. The fact that it is a fungus invading the living material furthers contributes to this association because depression occurs when negativity invades a person's mind.

The piece consists of a tall and narrow wall-hung piece of walnut with chiseled boards capping each end. Each board has blue stain streaks in it. Three forms emerge from the base. They are three armless figures looking up in horror at three corresponding hands reaching down at them, reminiscent of stalactites and stalagmites. The figures have no arms, which contributes to the feeling of helplessness. The work expresses my feelings of fear and anxiety about things beyond my control.



**Plate 6:** *Knot Split*, 15" x 30" x 3", mahogany and walnut

## KNOT SPLIT

*Knot Split* is about the tribulations of a romantic relationship. It is part of the storyline of the joint journey undertaken by two people who decide to share their lives. My beloved boyfriend Jimmy is my life mate. He moved from Pittsburgh with me to come to graduate school. This was the first time after six years together that he and I shared a living space, and the adjustment period was difficult. We had all of these shared responsibilities and no one else besides each other. Simply learning to live together brought out arguments about unimportant things. When arguing with a person that you live with, there is nowhere to escape. I would go into another room in the apartment, but still feel his presence. This piece captures the moment of reconciliation when we came around the walls to embrace one another. The figures are carved out of mahogany, which was salvaged from a piece of furniture from our first apartment together. The form of the structure was envisioned as a type of sacrificial altar. A long base serves as a floor for the figures that peer around a single column that supports a massive horizontal 'chopping block' piece above. The piece on top is a beautiful plank of walnut with abrasions and evidence of distress on the top in the center. It has a knot and a split in it creating the play on words, let's work through this and 'Knot Split' apart. Although it may be interpreted as ominous, I feel the work is a reminder of the obligation to sacrifice a part of my individuality in order to be part of this union.



**Plate 7:** *Roll On*, 63" x 9" x 89", walnut



**Plate 8:** *Roll On*, detail, 63" x 9" x 89", walnut

## ROLL ON

*Roll On* is another work that references Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, in this case the fourth chapter of the essay from which the whole work takes its name. In it Camus outlines the ancient Greek legend of Sisyphus who defied the unjust gods and eluded death until he was finally captured. The angry gods punished Sisyphus with the sentence of an eternity of laboriously pushing a boulder up a mountain, only to have it roll back down to the bottom once he has reached the top. Camus presents this ceaseless toil as a metaphor for the human condition. Life is constant struggle and suffering, but this should be embraced as an essential part of being. There are fleeting moments of glory and satisfaction when we have reached the top of the mountain, but we must always be prepared to strive and struggle again. One must always push on to better oneself.

I knew from the beginning of this series of work that I wanted to portray the essence of this story because it is an image that comes to my mind when times are tough. The figure was made during the meditative period of carving the *Gone Wandering* group. This particular figure stood out to me as special. The figure, with a faraway gaze and pleasing physique, was a perfect fit for depicting that moment of contemplation as Sisyphus makes his way down the mountain. He is about to strive once again. The structure consists of thick pieces of walnut lapped together at angles with a chiseled texture to imply a rocky mountainside. Sisyphus stands on a plateau halfway down the mountain. At the bottom lies his lot in life, his boulder. The rocky chiseled texture is symbolic of struggle, and yet chiseling this texture over a period of a couple of months was helpful in physically releasing anxiety. The chiseling of this massive structure serves as a good expression of a Sisyphean endeavor.



**Plate 9:** Hurlyburly, 22" x 25" x 6", mahogany and walnut

## HURLYBURLY

*Hurlyburly* places the lesson of *The Myth of Sisyphus* in the context of a relationship. In sharing my life with Jimmy I have learned that if either one of us is suffering in some way, the other person is deeply affected. We have developed a strong sense of empathy for one another and when one of us is suffering there is disharmony in both of our lives. The piece is a shelf-like structure constructed from knotted and burly walnut. Off center to the right side is a board with a chiseled edge dividing the space. A male figure stands on the left of this wall structure, peering over at a female figure on the far right near the edge. These figures were also carved out of wood from our furniture. On the far left there is a boulder on the ground. This scene represents times when I have been on the edge, overcome with anxiety, and how Jimmy has helped me to regain strength. The boulder is on the ground, but together they will push it back up the cliff. The burly nature of the wood lends itself to the concept. A burl in a tree indicates the tree had undergone some form of stress, like the stress of disharmony in a relationship. The term hurly-burly refers to disorder and confusion. You must share the load of the heavy boulder when in a relationship.



**Plate 10:** *Spalted*, 23" x 25" x 8", basswood and maple



**Plate 11:** *Spalted*, inside detail, 23" x 25" x 8", basswood and maple

## SPALTED

Spalted wood is resurrected. Buried underground for a period of time and later unearthed to be used by craftsmen, this partially decayed wood is admired for its unique markings. The scars of decay are its beauty. This is a sculpture about overcoming the hardships of pain and the difficult time that Jimmy had after being hit by a truck. The physical and emotional pain that resulted was debilitating. His back constantly hurt for about a year, leaving him unhappy and irritable, as he worked hard to physically rehabilitate himself. Fortunately he came out of that difficult situation a stronger and more positive person.

I used wood with knots, bore holes, and imperfections to create a beautiful sculpture with reliquary and shrine-like qualities in honor of his regained health and spirit. The knots to me are representative of pain. This work is an inversion of my perceptions about the situation. I realized that positive things could be obtained by overcoming hardships. The form takes on the shape of a moving vessel, signifying a flow or passage into another realm. The gateway structure is inspired by Japanese Shinto Gates, which signify an entrance into sacred space. There are three steps that lead up into this gateway, symbolic of transcendence. The steps lead out into the unknown future. The base consists of a partially rotted piece of basswood. Between the base and the gate structure is a tunnel. Looking into this tunnel, the viewer sees a hunched over man at the end silhouetted by light reflecting off of the spalted maple. This crouching figure in the dark tunnel represents Jimmy's physical and spiritual being in the initial pain of his accident. Above it a larger more muscular figure with a large knot in his back stands before the gateway. This figure is also Jimmy, but in a stage of recovery. He has climbed up into the light and is ready to move forward.



**Plate 12:** *Reflection*, 15" x 39" x 3 1/2", basswood, maple, poplar



**Plate 13:** *Reflection*, detail, 15" x 39" x 3 1/2",  
basswood, maple, poplar

## REFLECTION

This sculpture serves as a reminder that there must be a balance of emotions in life. I call this work *Reflection*, which is appropriate on two levels. The opposing natures of the two larger figures in the center reflects my mental state when carving them. My original aim was to carve a figure with a muscular body and upraised arms representative of overcoming weakness and pain. I was feeling disheartened at the time, and created the feeble looking figure on the bottom. When in a more peaceful state of mind I was able to create the strong figure originally intended.

Those two figures are joined at the feet with the triumphant one oriented upright and the weak one upside-down. Both of these figures have their arms raised above their heads as if in a reaching or diving position. Their orientation and similar gestures makes the bottom figure seem like a watery reflection of the top. This sense is enhanced by the bottom figure's wavy and distorted nature.

The robust and triumphant figure on top is carved out of hard maple, which is a strong and dense wood. The feeble and forlorn figure pointing down is made from a partially decayed piece of basswood. The physical and emotional characteristics of the materials used are reflected in the carved figures. These figures are set into a niche in the center of a large horizontal crosspiece that has upraised hands carved on the ends. The cross piece is made out of a piece of basswood that is intact on the left side and has irregularities and weaknesses on the right. The horizontal piece serves as a landscape for the two smaller figures, which are set further back than the others near the center. The figure on the right decayed side is looking off in the distance. The figure on the left is fixed on the large triumphant figure before him and is

imitating its gesture. This figure is focused on transcendence, while the one on the right has lost sight of it, looking away.

In composing this work, I was thinking about the Crucifix of the Christian faith. Many Christians hang small crucifixes in their homes for the purpose of reflection and meditation. I am interested in the resurrection of Christ as seen as a metaphor for spiritual awakening and resurrection within the context of human life. One does not need to physically die in order to be spiritually resurrected. The hands on the ends are oriented as the viewer's would be if they raised their hands up. In this way, I implore the viewers to reflect on this concept of spiritual awakening within the context of their own lives.



**Plate 14:** *It Figures*, 15 1/2" x 7" x 5", curly eucalyptus and curly maple

## IT FIGURES

*It Figures* is a homage to the serendipity of carving wood. The title is an esoteric inside joke to those familiar with wood. The piece consists of a headless female figure carved out of curly eucalyptus set into a small wall niche made of curly maple. The characteristic of the wood that designates these as being 'curly' is the figure of the wood. Curly figure or grain is the result of longitudinal cell structure that is not straight, but more like a washboard (Hoadley 27). It is difficult to carve this type of wood. I was given a small block of curly eucalyptus, which I used to carve a female figure. I was pleased with the resulting form after a struggle with the odd grain direction. In the final moments of cleaning up the neckline with a gouge, the head snapped off. I thought, "It figures that this would happen", and then I laughed because that is the nature of the wood. The headless and armless figure recalls Venus statues, so I created the arched niche as a setting inspired by the small wall niches of antiquity.



**Plate 15:** *Sorry!*, 8 1/2" x 29 1/4" x 3", cedar and poplar

## SORRY!

I am close with my family and moving away from home to go to graduate school has been hard on all of us. Board games were a quintessential family activity for me growing up. *Sorry!* is a sentimental and nostalgic sculpture that conveys feelings of homesickness and love for my family. The title references a board game and is appropriate on many levels. The figures in this piece were carved during the *Gone Wandering* period. I was feeling particularly lonely and homesick at this time, which contributed to the depression I was feeling. The figures are carved out of the same piece of poplar. This piece of wood was unique in that it was so green in color. It almost didn't look natural. I took these figures aside and they seemed to belong together, like a family. I came across a scrap piece of poplar with an intriguing green circular knot and streak on it. When I brought this into my studio space and placed the green figures upon it I was reminded of the board game *Sorry!*, and this piece was conceived. The ultimate goal of the board game is to get all of your pieces back to a home base, a safety zone. The knot in this board of poplar is visually reminiscent of this safety zone. The piece consists of a shelf-like structure made out of cedar, which has a warm reddish tone. Cedar chests, which often hold things like games, are made out of this material. I also chose the red-toned cedar to compliment the green figures because the combination of red and green always makes me think of Christmas, which has been the only time I have been able to see my family in recent years. The front edge features the knotted poplar board with the 'safety zone' on the right. On the left side of the shelf, a female figure moves toward a group of three figures on the right, directly above the 'safety zone'. There is a turned piece of the green poplar made to look like a *Sorry!* game piece on the top edge near the female figure. The woman on the left is heading back home, to her 'safety zone'.



**Plate 16:** *Love Nest*, 9" x 3 3/4" x 5 1/4", canary wood, pine, poplar

## LOVE NEST

*Love Nest* is about destiny, being in love, and finding a soul mate. The two figures in this piece were some of the first carved. I sought to carve desperate figures in a seemingly bound position, with their arms held back. A female figure made of canary wood and a male figure made out of poplar resulted from this effort. These figures were cast in various torturous scenarios with other figures I had carved as I arranged and rearranged them in my studio space. Through this playfulness, in the early stages of this body of work, the two figures at some point ended up next to one another. While separate they both seem to have an air of desperation, positioned next to each other they became passionate lovers leaning into a kiss. Since the female figure is canary wood, I designated them lovebirds. They are set into a small birdhouse structure. The form is reminiscent of a small chapel. The figures are standing at the threshold. The object is an intimate reliquary of love. It is a celebration of romantic love between two people who choose to share their lives with each other. Personally, it is about moving to Greenville with my beloved and sharing a place for the first time. I am so delighted that after all of this time, I am still hopelessly and passionately in love.

## CONCLUSION

Before this exploration, I had always identified myself as an object maker, making things with no significance beyond aesthetic beauty and function. A goal of this creative research was to engage in a cathartic art making experience; to purge emotions through the act of creation. This confrontation with my inner feelings of fear and anxiety proved to be painful, but that pain was necessary to achieve purgation. Making them has been an adventure into my own psyche; into my subconscious thoughts and feelings which I unveiled through my art. Baring raw emotions through visual communication, making these works has taken me completely out of my comfort zone and therefore broadened my fine art sensibilities.

Another goal of this creative research was to make sculptures with a deeper conceptual meaning in a narrative format, and I now recognize the irony of using the apparent meaninglessness of life as a starting point. From there, problematic aspects of myself such as indecision and anxiety, along with difficult experiences were examined. Finally, I have come to terms with some of these issues and how I have found meaning in my life's experiences and loving relationships. In this way, I have created a sculptural series that expressed a narrative arc of emotions from discomfort and difficulty to resolutions and peacefulness. These are dream-like scenes from my ongoing journey.

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