

An aerial photograph of a forest at night, illuminated with vibrant, multi-colored lights. The canopy is lit from below, creating a gradient of colors from deep blue and purple at the bottom to bright green and yellow at the top. The word "TOTEM" is overlaid in the center in a bold, white, sans-serif font. The background is a dark, starry night sky.

# TOTEM



2020

# TOTEM

VOLUME LXIII

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
LITERARY AND VISUAL ARTS MAGAZINE

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VICTORIA LIU

## Dog Days

There once was a Mister, like this—  
At home, no Diane he could kiss,  
So he ransacked her ‘hose,  
Smelled her socks with his nose,  
  
Until satisfaction was his.  
But then he heard Mail Man outside—  
An imbecile lost on his ride!  
So he chased him away,  
Gave him no time of day.  
He wished that that man could have  
died!  
  
At noon, it was time for the Sings.  
Out windows and doors came the rings  
Of his buds, all a-woo—  
A grand choir to ensue—  
Some joy for the neighborhood kings.

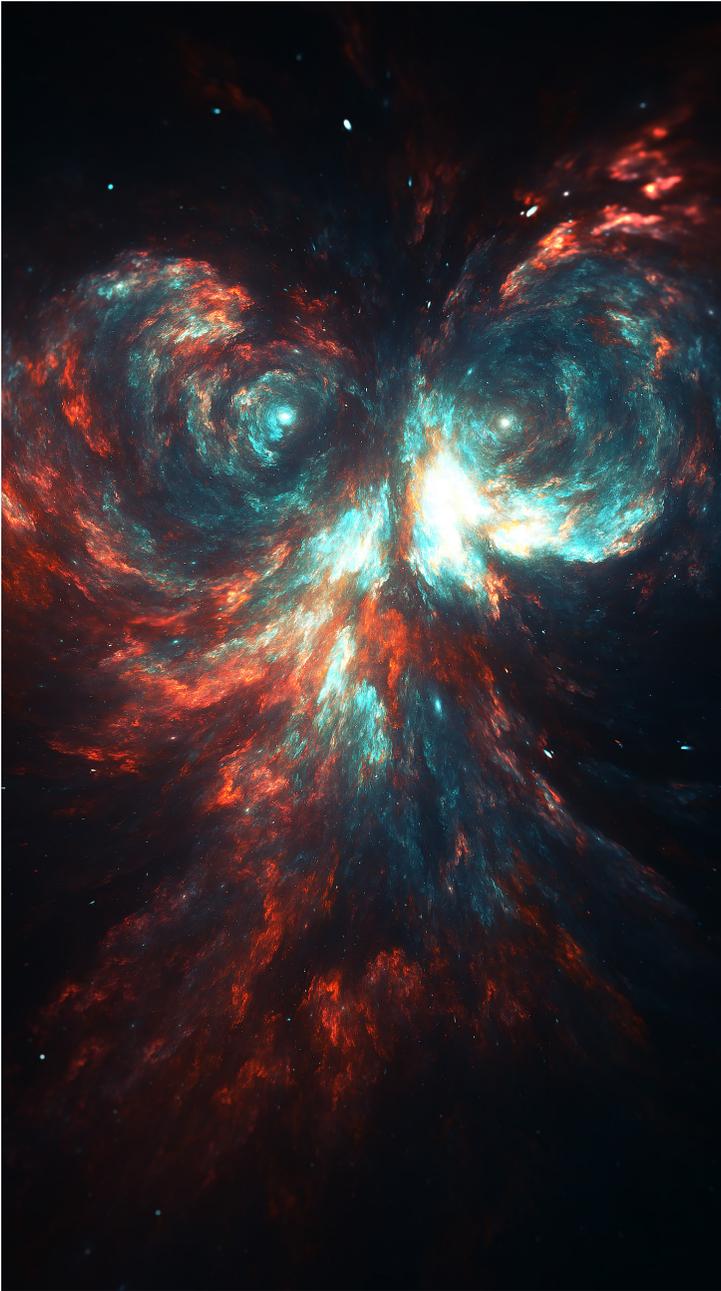
His dogs were all barking like mad,  
So yoga was next for the lad.  
Downward dog, cat and cow—  
Yes, but that’s it for now.  
  
The sleeping pose nap was too rad.  
A snooze later, zooming kicked in.  
He ran on the lawn making din.  
What are those? Yummy lumps?  
Oh my, ew! Doo-doo dumps!  
What travesty those smells had been!  
  
He lay on the couch, hating fate.  
Now things were so dreadfully late.  
And where was his food?  
It was honestly rude,  
That Diane made him wait, wait, and  
wait.  
  
An engine then roused his whole rate!  
He ran to Diane at the gate!  
Mister, who’s a good boy?  
Of course me, dah-dah-doy!  
At last, the reward for his wait!



LOGAN APPLE | Ink | Digital



ZIYAN MO | AI | Digital Art



LOGAN APPLE | Apocalypse | Digital Art

VICTORIA LIU

## Tralfa m'a adoré

### Part I: Past and Present

*Lolita:*

We sit across from each other on our third date  
At Abricott, a small Edenic oasis in the dry rush of life.  
I watch you lovingly as we share our  
Tom yum soup and pork bowl and Chinese doughnuts.  
You feed me the first spoonful of soup.  
I reach over to hold your hand.  
Are you my Seraph in Pasadena?

*Ariadne:*

I stand alone now.  
Abricott is gone, replaced by some vegan  
Men's farm, a  
Peculiar pandering for  
Rural rebound desires. I tolerate the take  
Out line for my  
Hipster health fix. But  
I imagine you here, the two of us  
Blissfully breaking up and  
Ingenuously giggling at absurdities. Alas,  
Thou wander elsewhere. Our  
Entangled existences have long since  
Drifted apart.

*Lolita:*

We sit side by side on a bench  
By the pond, a stone split in the concrete wilderness,  
Providing abundant drink for the turtles.  
We stare up at the heavens, and you explain why  
The moon has a white halo.  
I listen to your physics expertise,  
Lovingly drawing halos around your head.  
I swing my arms around your chest.  
I love you more by the hour.

*Ariadne:*

I lie alone now.  
The hard bench feels good for my sore back.  
The pond smells like oranges,  
The turtles are nowhere to be seen in the dark.  
I shed mes lunettes en rose  
That I have worn for so long.  
Diana's halo is now rusted with blood,  
And I see the red flags around you that  
I could not see before.

*Lolita:*

We sit next to each other on a bench  
By the Gene Pool, a serene  
Cleansing area for a pair of ducks at night.  
We decide that in another life,  
We must be the Buddhist ducks,  
Calmly taking in life together,  
Peacefully coexisting without dislike or suspicion.  
I shift positions and put my head in your lap.  
I feel married to you, that is all.

*Ariadne:*

I walk alone now.  
The bench is empty, the daytime sprinklers are on,  
The ducks are gone.  
If the chestnut trees had voices,  
They would lament how  
I sold you and you sold me.  
We forgot about evolution.  
Why were we ducks?  
We could've been swans or beavers or albatross.

*Part II: Present and Future*

*Ariadne:*

These past four years have been bananas.  
At dawn, my dreams catch into whirlpools,  
Swallowed up forever.  
At noon, people and places come in  
And out of my life like serpent heads.  
At night, I live in oblivion past  
And converse with myself; in my head,  
Meandering in memory,  
Longing for the past.  
Erythraea, will I ever yearn for the future?

*Sybilla:*

Eden thus exposed—  
Diamonds aren't forever,  
Eden were no Eden,  
Nothing gold can stay.  
But Phoenix rises from the ashes,  
Echeveria thrives from the beheading.  
The future will be more bananas.  
If not for anything else, you must  
Wait for the future to see where  
On the wheel you land.

*Ariadne:*

My life is a wave pool gone awry;  
The tides never seem to break,  
They build 'til I can't escape.  
I am drowning.  
I am trapped in a warren of void,  
A labyrinth of physical suffering,  
With no string or bread crumbs.  
My misaligned nerves shudder with pain;  
I feel withered and old.  
Cumae, will I ever become you?

*Sybilla:*

I am prohibited from telling you.  
Throughout your lifetime,  
You can be the conflation of every literary  
Heroine and villain and placeholder and discarded thought.  
But you must choose your own roles,  
And I cannot herald what you will become.  
You feel lost in an underwater maze,  
But you can learn to swim and stay afloat—  
For the water takes but also gives.  
Do not give up the struggle for a handful of sand.

*Ariadne:*

I have a friend named Jeremy Bearimy.  
We drink tea together and talk about  
A life where time is non-linear.  
We spell out therapy with art and  
Find solace in novels. We look through my  
Tiny telescope in search of five-fingered toilet plungers  
Whizzing comically through a 4D universe.  
I am convinced that finding one  
Will clear the opaque orb of the future.  
Cassandra, will I ever find what I seek?

*Sybilla:*

Your life is not a novel,  
Your world is not a stage.  
I cannot tell you what the future holds  
Or if your toilet plunger friends exist.  
Find your labyrinth in the rose garden at Burnt Norton—  
There, the past cannot be changed,  
The future cannot be foreseen.  
There, time is unredeemable,  
Not even for the bluest carbuncle,  
Except in the present.

*Ariadne:*

Je ne regrette rien,  
Je ne regrette rien.  
I comfort myself.



WEILAI YU | In Peace | Photography



WEILAI YU | Weather the Valley | Photography

GENNADY GORIN

## Untitled

Above, a washed-out tableau, watercolor of streaming, freezing fog between the blue firs punctuating the campus. Below, morose concrete, soot, dark Satanic boilers in the guts of the building, soapstone laboratories coated with a layer of cigarette tar, old terminals with monitors stained brown by time and the selfsame tar, ghosts of stopped clocks. The grant deadline was tomorrow. I wrote, struck first by inspiration, transitioning, indistinctly, into confusion, then panic. The hum of the subbasement insinuated itself into me; when it stopped, subdued panic broke into fear. Temperature dropped. Goosebumps like sharp pangs of hostility surrounding me, walls closing in, the building circumscribing me endlessly, except a nauseating warmth of comfort surrounding the desk.

I swiveled around, reached for my thermos, poured bitter and stale coffee into an enamel cup; as I took a swig and fumbled with the cap, the thermos rearranged itself into a pile of shards and grounds on the floor. I stared at it, frowning. The puddle of coffee oozed out, spread, a dark mirror I saw myself reflected in, broken by pieces of glass. The grounds settled. A tower rose above my reflection. I looked back at the desk and saw that the polished concrete of the wall rearranged itself, without any apparent change, into the landscape of a flat, lifeless desert, dominated by a cyclopean lighthouse and its piercing, iridescent ray. I felt ashamed for not having noticed it before; then, naked and transparent under the eye of the lighthouse. A cold draft reached out to me, bringing memories of ammonia and tulips.

The door opened and the student from the laser lab across the hall told me she was going to grab tea and a box of chicken strips from the food truck down the street, and asked whether I wanted anything. The spotlight caught me, pinned me like a butterfly, and I felt the fine black sand under my feet. The flame of warmth around my desk expanded noiselessly and imploded, leaving an acrid taste in my mouth, and a column of numbing, frozen air.

"Nothing," said I, a coward and a liar.



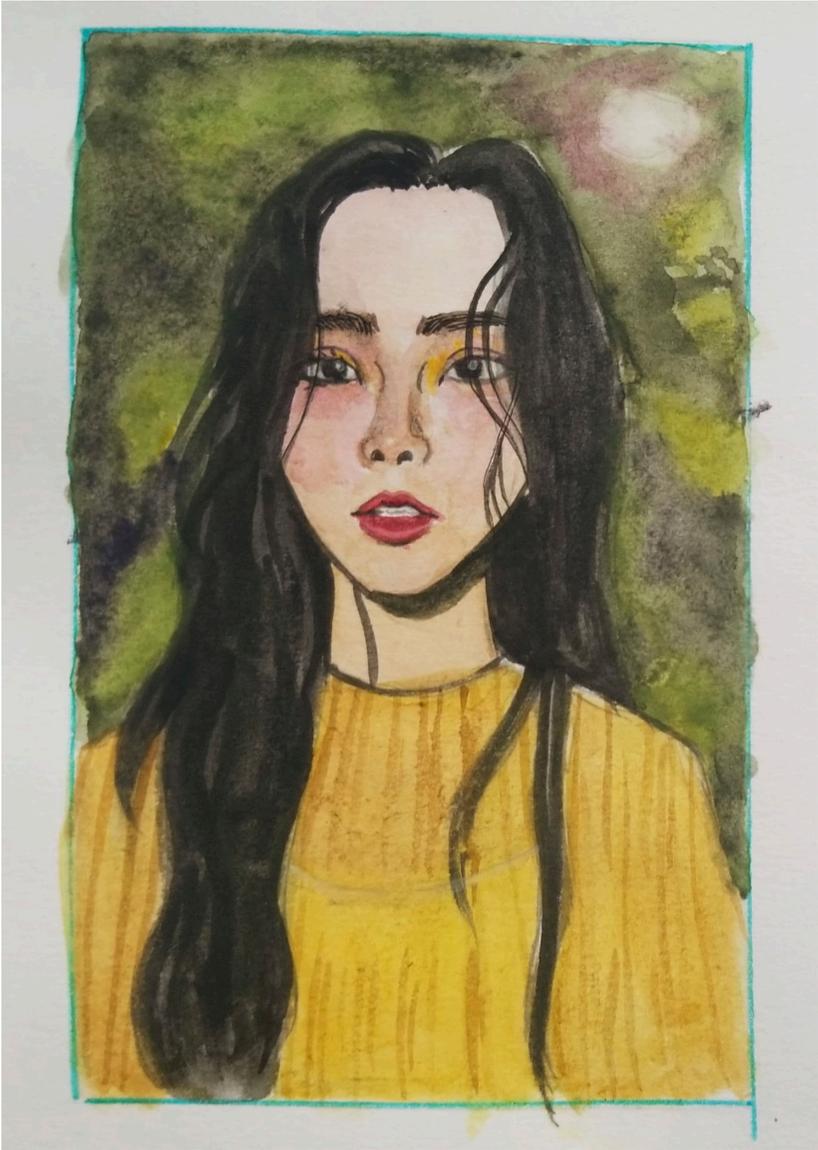
CHRISTOPHER WANG | Convict Lake | Photography



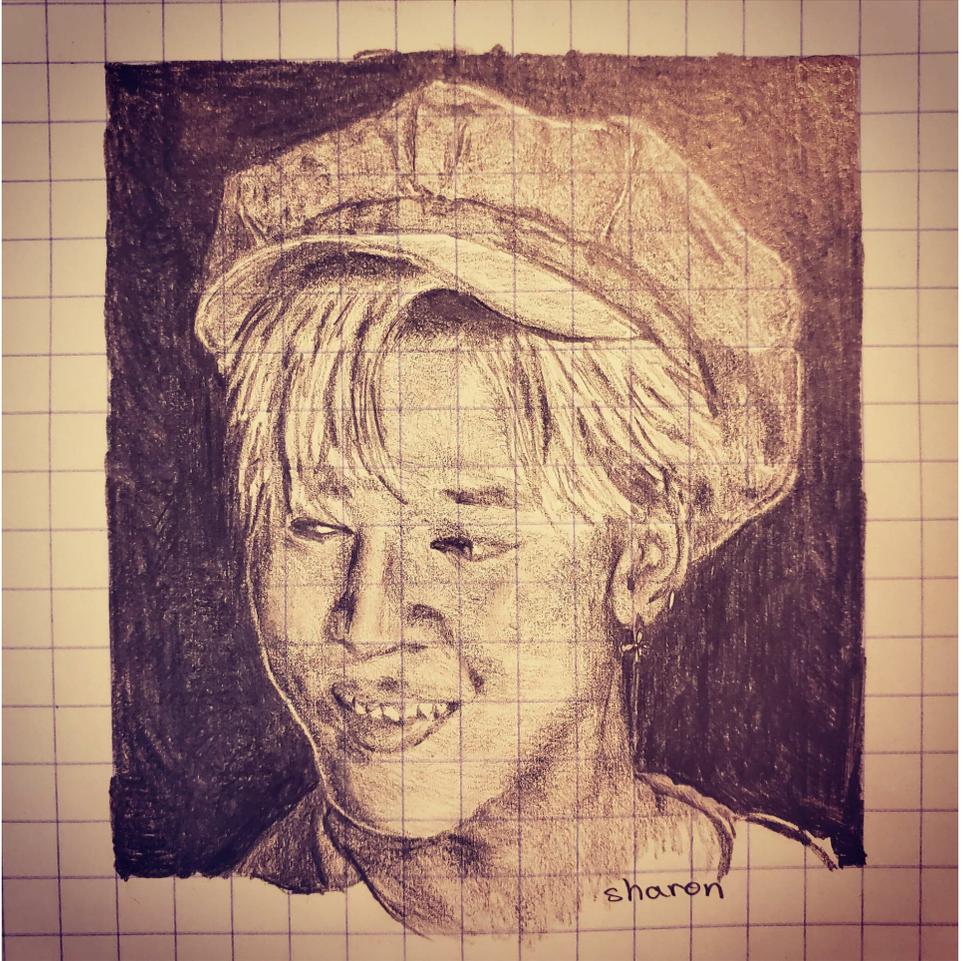
AMY WANG | Untitled | Photography



KRITI DEVAENAPATHY | Hadrian's Library 12.17.19 | Photography



NORA GRIFFITH | Wheein | Watercolor



SHARON CHEN | Jiming's Filter | Pencil

SHREYA ANAND  
**Punta de los lobos**

*Los lobos marinos* – the natives  
must have imagined them  
howling, bobbing along in open sea –  
these strange, whiskered creatures  
with silken manes. Now, I imagine  
many distant undulations  
smearing into a dissonant chord;  
the roar of frothing waves  
crashing against the rocks  
like some frolicsome sea creature.  
You imagine lions and  
dragons of the sea,  
and my flute's voice is the wind,  
echoing against the  
ribbed walls of the semi-circular cove.  
Perhaps the blue-throated cormorants  
dance to this silent music that  
only we can hear;  
perhaps the furry sea-wolf  
rocks her babe to sleep  
with this lullaby

as she floats serenely  
in the deep cyan sea.

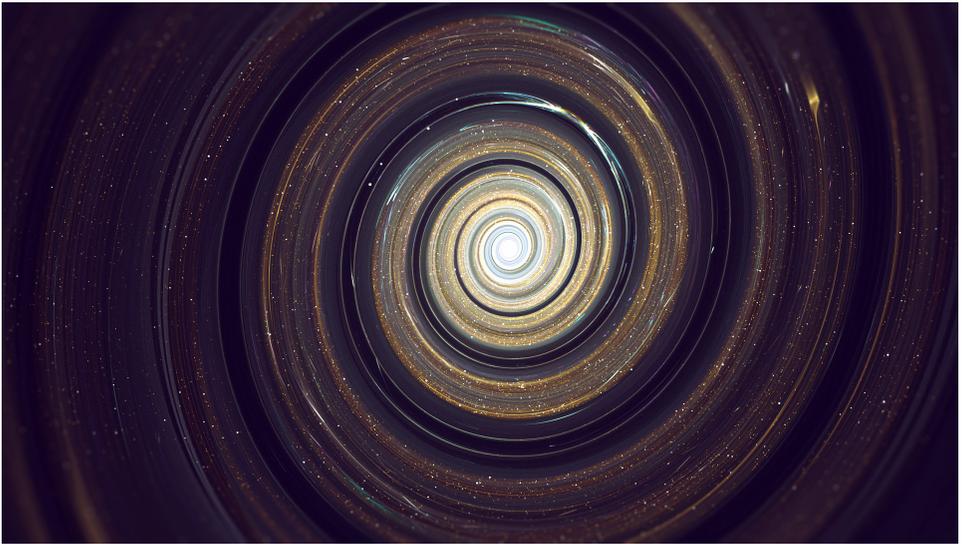
We imagine, together, a greeting in the distance,  
a spouting fountain, a tail emerging  
fleeting before it is swallowed again,  
far from where we stand,  
silently observing.

In this dream  
the sunset – a flaming ochre –  
illuminates your beauty,  
the clicking of our asynchronous heartbeats  
audible, but only just.

We experience timelessness.  
In this dream, you and I  
will never be on opposite coasts.

I will never wonder  
whether I dreamed up this fantasy.  
You will sing,  
but never move on.

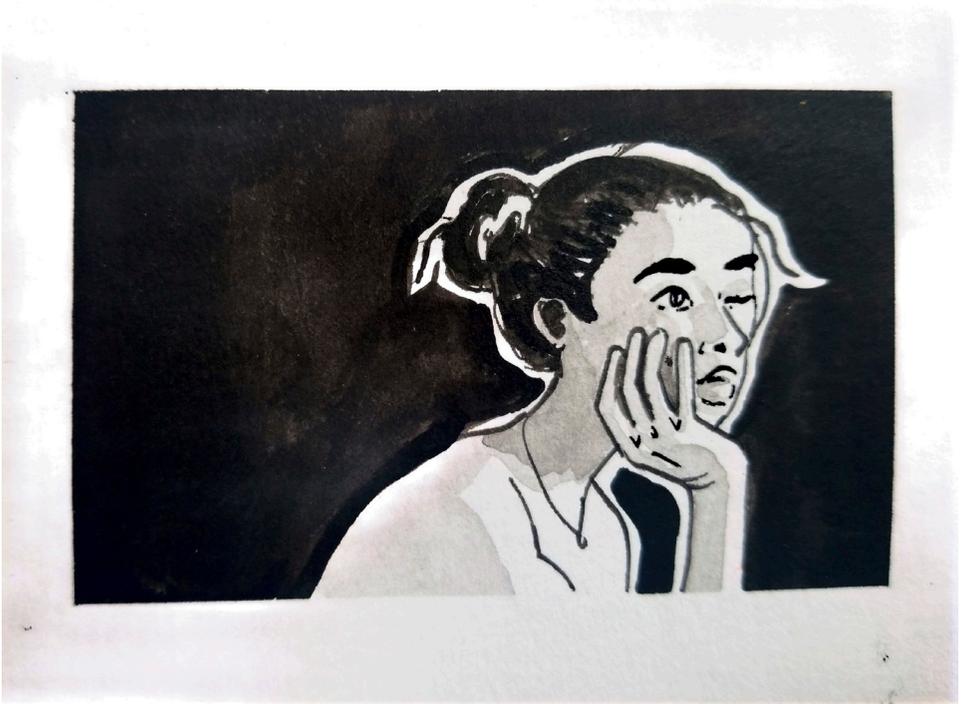
And we will never search  
for the ghost of a melody  
that once lingered  
on our lips.



LOGAN APPLE | Constellate | Digital



CHRISTOPHER WANG | Knots of Time | Photography



NORA GRIFFITH | Mindless | Watercolor



ZIYAN MO | Trapped | Digital Art

MELISSA GONZALEZ  
**Child, Again**

I stared at the clock, fixating my senses on the hollow ticking sound made by the passing of each second. No matter how many seconds passed, the next minute never seemed to come. I knew that the minutes I desperately awaited were tactically sunken somewhere in the sludge of spacetime, trudging through it, striving to manifest themselves into the world. Their journey through the sludge made a minute feel like an eternity—hell, it was an eternity. I could only imagine the amount of people that had confessed their love, gotten married, gotten divorced, conceived a child, or died within the span of that one minute that struggled to pass; entire lifetimes beginning and ending within time that seemed nothing but trivial to me.

*Trivial*—that was the word! Lately, everything consisted of trivialities: what time I went to bed, what time I woke up, whether I finished my homework, or whether I continued my relationship with this or that person. For one, I felt like none of these decisions mattered, as they were microscopic entities that when contrasted with the grandness of the universe, were invisible. I often reflected on how much anything I did mattered, but knew that eventually one day all and everything I knew would disappear, and everything that everyone had ever accomplished would completely and utterly dissipate into boundless nothingness. As I saw it, it was now just my time to be here on this earth, and live pretending that I ought to exist because these trivialities brought substance into my life.

The clock ticked once more and everyone stood up from their seats. The sudden shuffling and voices of others jerked me awake and broke me from my inner monologue. I begrudgingly slugged out of my seat and took a step forward to walk to my next class, mentally preparing talk more about trivialities about the nature of reality which I frankly did not care about. As I exited the building, I felt a cold, nipping drop of water hit my skin. I looked up, coming face to face with the sky, who threatened me with tempestuous clouds. I stared at it, challenging it to let another drop of water touch me. It retaliated by letting thousands of droplets hit my face at once, blurring my eyesight as I ran away in cowardice.

I ran and ran until I stepped into something thick, something filthy. The substance desperately clung to my shoe, forcing me to

fall. It wasn't until I was on the floor, completely enveloped in the substance, that I finally realized what it was: *mud*. I got up, groaning, shaking my hands vigorously and stomping into the concrete in a vain attempt to rid myself of the mud that dirtied me. When my hands were somewhat cleaner, I wiped my face and rubbed my eyes to clear my eyesight.

It was in that moment, when my vision was not blurred anymore, that I looked down onto the ground to reveal little splatters of mud decorating the dull, empty concrete. I analyzed the little details: perfectly wonderful drippings of mud made of various sizes and textures scattered onto the floor. I had accidentally replicated a Pollock with my silly little accident. I watched in awe as each droplet of rain that hit the concrete added a new detail, a new dimension of messy, a new touch of beautiful. I laughed with joy, kneeling down to pick up more fistfuls of mud and placing them on the floor. Then, I continued my artwork by carefully spreading the mud around the gray concrete, painting patterns onto the floor with my bare fingers. I did not care that I was soaking wet, madly laughing as I sat on the concrete. I was a child, again, simply enchanted by this concoction of dirt and water as my tool for creation.

This was what I had unavailingly longed for: unfettered naiveté characterized by the ability to transcend time and become a child again. I had so often focused on the blandness of the trivialities that defined me, forgetting to relish in their inherent wondrous aspect of being *trivial*. What time I went to bed, what time I woke up, whether I finished my homework, my relationship with others, the consequences of being late to class while I sat drenched on the concrete while others watched me foolishly laughing, and the fact that my creation would be eventually completely washed away by the rain really mattered *so little* that I had the freedom to do whatever I wanted. It was then that I realized that I am explorer guided by my own childlike carelessness, dipping my feet on the shores of the cosmic ocean, ready to dive into the waters of unrestrained wonder and naked joy.



JEROME SEEBECK | 2 Hours Beside the Lake | Photography

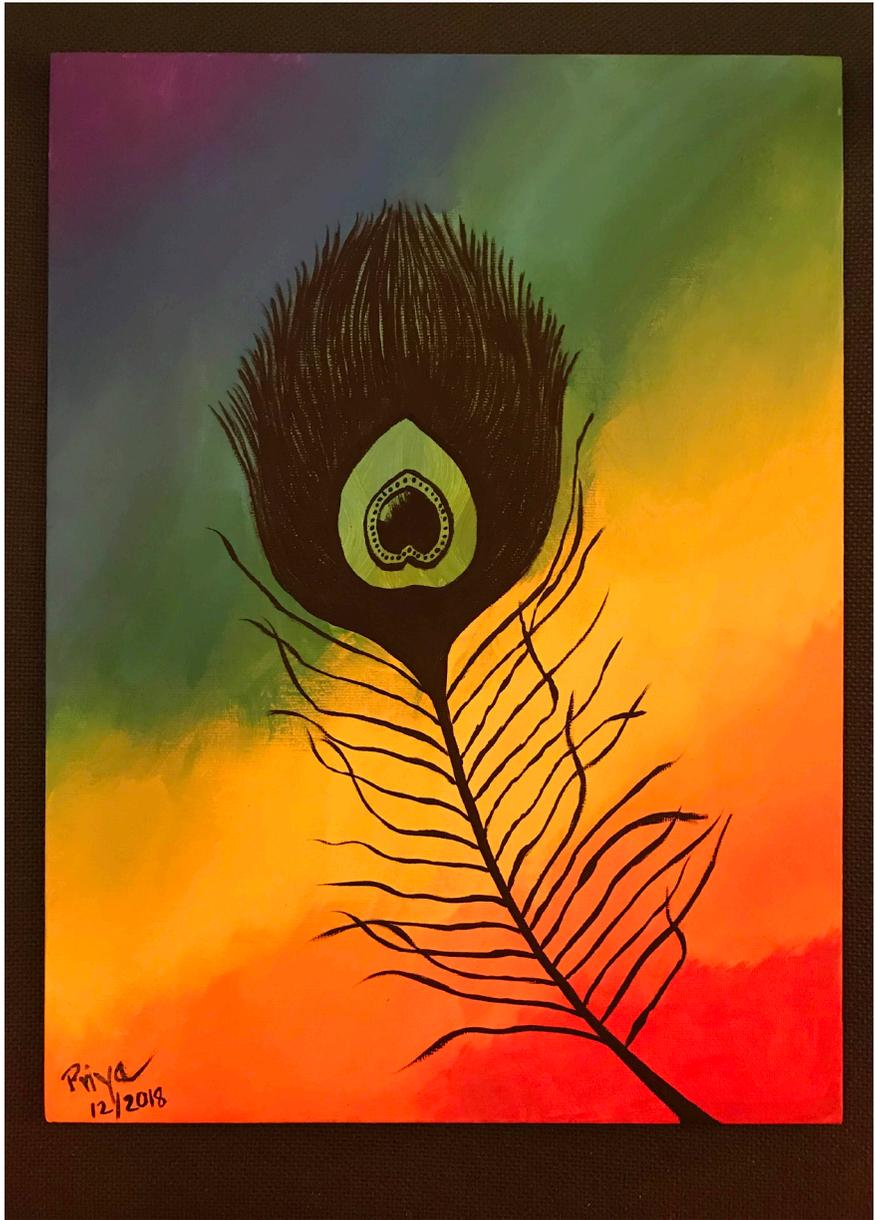


KAI NARITA | Microcosmos | Electron Microscopy

*Colored scanning electron microscope image of a 1 mm size sheet-based 3D structure made of carbon. Combination of additive manufacturing and pyrolysis enables to make the micro-scale 3D carbon architecture.*



LOGAN APPLE | Disappearance | Digital



SRIPRIYA KUMAR | Untitled | Paint

SHARON CHEN

# A Day in the Life of a Girl Who Found a Dragon

Jacky had too much homework and had to start working on it. She remembered that as she was about to put on her thongs. The realization brought a wave a stress onto her body and she felt her forehead turning blue or gray and her brain crumbling down. Her body was new to this type of stress; it did not even know that it existed. This stress was brought onto Jacky by herself, though. At least, she thought it was by herself. Her actions were all done from her own will, right? Even though she was still in elementary school and at the tender age of eight, she was taking rigorous online classes in four different subjects that she had registered herself into: they were Paleontology: the History of Life on Earth, Advanced Calculus for Practical Purposes, Conflict Resolution for Geniuses in Need, and Reptile Cognition.

She was exhausted because she was not used to the amount of work she had loaded upon herself. She had just signed up for those classes on her phone when she had first discovered the dragon. No one knew that she was taking those classes, not even the instructors of the classes. Jacky was keeping the fact that she was taking the classes a secret. So secret she wanted it to be that she had made up four different accounts on her computer and on the online school's website. She planned to finish the homework for those classes as fast as possible or else others in her family might find it suspicious as to why she kept on working on homework. She also did not want Avery to think that she was very slow at doing even elementary school homework. They were more work than she had thought. She went to bed late that night, and did not have anything to do other than more homework and online lectures to go through on her own when she got up the next day.

She tapped her index finger, middle finger, and ring finger on the inside of her left wrist and opened up her computer. It was time for her Reptile Cognition class. She looked to the right, where there was a mosaic of real-time face motion-pictures - all the students in the class, except for hers, was there. She touched the pictures of people she wanted to listen to. They were the loud people who

talked about interesting things and it didn't matter to them that she didn't speak. But she had started entering the conversations they had from listening to all the conversations they had had. They only knew her by her face, which showed up in the mosaic of real-time face motion-pictures on each of their respective computer screens' right-hand-sides. The topics they talked about were random and were usually stopped by the teacher who would tap his screen quickly and mute all the students' voices not only to him but all other students when he was intent on giving a lecture. Now, he was giving a lecture on how snakes thought.

Jacky felt that the dragon next to her was shifting itself. It looked like it was also interested in the class lecture. When the lecture was over, the teacher asked for the students to talk among themselves, and Jacky resumed the conversation that she was having with her fellow remote classmates. They did not know she had a dragon. She had told them she owned a pet reptile, just like the other people. However, the other people owned pet lizards, snakes, and turtles, not dragons. They couldn't own dragons because the dragon that Jacky had was the only dragon that had left the cave, which was the origin of all dragons on Earth. Dragons did not want to spread out because, for them, being herded together and living in a large community was what brought them prosperity and safety.

"Have you guys ever heard thee story about me mousy and me snake?" a hazel-eyed, curly red-haired woman asked to the conversation group.

"No, please tell us," a man with gray eyes, a few wrinkles under and around his eyes, with a brown beard that went all the way from his left to his right cheek, replied.

"Oh, yes, please tell us the story," a young boy looked up with dark complexion, a curious set of aqua-colored eyes, a flat nose, and a booger sticking out of his left nostril also replied. Jacky could hear him clapping his hands, which were invisible to her from behind her computer, but were real and across the globe from where she was.

"Yeah, I want to hear it," Jacky chimed in, her black hair and black eyes, so dark that the pupil could not be seen. Because of her

eyes, she looked the most like a reptile out of the group, and that was saying a lot, because her classmates were obsessed with reptiles to the point which they had started to dress, act, and look like reptiles.

Her dragon had rolled onto her lap and was almost in the camera's view but Jacky moved her leg and the dragon rolled back down the bed. It really wanted to listen to the conversation and take a good look at the people in the class. They were all so different. The students were so diverse, from all different parts of the world, yet they were all obsessed with the same thing. It didn't really mean that Jacky was obsessed, too, with reptiles - she was the newest member of the class, having just become interested in reptiles because of the prophecy and because of her recent finding of the dragon.

"So, I got to the fridge that held all fifty frozen mousies I had in stock to feed me snake."

"Uh-huh," the three others in the group chat nodded. What the woman had just said was perfectly typical.

"And then what happened?" the boy's eyes widened.

"I found my mouse there, frozen not because of me freezing him! When I caught him in me hand, it peed in my palm!"

The man, the boy, and Jacky all displayed disgusted looks on their faces. The woman smiled in recognition of their facial expressions.

"Of course I quickly wrapped a towel around both me mousy and me palm so that I wouldn't get the old, gossamer skin that me snake had shed just a few days beforehand on the carpet that perfectly matched its skin, dirty. I'm going to make a necklace for meself using that skin when it dries out."

The man nodded in approval. He had a snake himself and loved to make quilts out of the skin that the snake shed.

"Then, I saw me snake wriggling back into its skin! It was protective of its own old skin! Such a smarty-snake. He knows that

that skin was his and was coming back to claim it and transport it away from the dripping towel of mine with that crazy mouse. What was he doing in the fridge?"

"Could he be related to any of the mice that you were going to feed the snake?" the boy asked. "Do you think he recognized any of the mice that were frozen to become the snake's food?"

"He might have been mourning for his long-lost relative!" Jacky exclaimed.

"Actually, he wasn't. At least, I don't think he was. All those mice look the same. Even though they have spots on different parts of their pelt, they look so indistinguishable. I'm not really good with rodents. I'm just good with reptiles. I could tell me snake apart from all other snakes!" the woman smiled broadly, a mole showing from between the wrinkles of her lips that was usually concealed. "In fact, I'm thinking of sacrificing me mousy. There aren't his mommy, daddy, or siblings in the fridge right now, but he will be. The first in his family in that high-end and spacious fridge! Frozen like a statue from the most marvelous museum! What a treat that will be for him and for the sna-"

"All right, class. It's time for your group presentations," the teacher muted every student's voice so that everyone could focus attention onto him. He then unmuted the group of faces of the woman, the man, the boy, and Jacky. They would be the first to present.

"Reptiles are under discrimination and prejudice. Why else would we call humans who have personality disorders that cause them to be really mean and cruel reptiles? Why are eyes of humans that stare at you as if it wants to suck your blood reptilian eyes? Why call sociopaths snakes in suits? I have a pet reptile, and I can see that it has a lot of good inside its heart, too. So I'm very glad that there's this reptile cognition class that helps us, human beings, to understand more about the cognitive functioning of reptiles," said Jacky. It was the introduction of her group's presentation. The dragon drifted off to sleep in admiration of Jacky's introduction and didn't hear the rest of the class.



CHRISTOPHER WANG | Flowers | Photography



AMY WANG | Untitled | Photography



WEILAI YU | Sunset by the Sea | Photography



WEILAI YU | Untitled | Photography



AMY WANG | Untitled | Photography



## POETRY

Shreya Anand

Victoria Liu

## ART

Logan Apple

Sharon Chen

Kriti

Devasenapathy

Nora Griffith

Sripriya Kumar

Ziyan Mo

Kai Narita

Jerome Seebeck

Amy Wang

Christopher Wang

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