

# TOTEM





2021

# TOTEM

VOLUME LXIV

CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY  
LITERARY AND VISUAL ARTS MAGAZINE

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Special thanks to the Division of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Student Affairs, and the Associated Students of the California Institute of Technology.

# T A B L E

## LITERARY

5	12	26	36
<b>A Year Like No Other</b> Celia Chari	<b>Cowcatcher</b> Gennady Gorin	<b>Scene</b> Jenny Ji	<b>3 Hours Ahead</b> Daniel Neamati

# O F

## VISUAL

# C O N T E N T S

Front	4	7	8
<b>Dream of Caltech</b> Weilai Yu	<b>A Year Like No Other</b> Celia Chari	<b>Arch of Beckman Institute</b> Weilai Yu	<b>Big Bear Lake</b> Weilai Yu
9	10	11	16
<b>Color of 2021</b> Weilai Yu	<b>Color of Fall</b> Weilai Yu	<b>Dream of Caltech</b> Weilai Yu	<b>Driftless</b> Danny Wendt
17	20	21	22
<b>Final Frontier</b> Jennah Colborn	<b>Flower Medley</b> Celia Chari	<b>Looking Closely at the Flowers</b> Nora Griffith	<b>Mile Markers</b> Katelyn Lee
23	24	25	30
<b>Palos Verdes Sunset</b> Weilai Yu	<b>Piper</b> Liam Silvera	<b>Sandy Sunrise</b> Nora Griffith	<b>Second Home</b> Liam Silvera
31	32	33	34
<b>Sorcery</b> Logan Apple	<b>Wandergreen</b> Logan Apple	<b>Wildfire</b> Logan Apple	<b>Woods</b> Liam Silvera
35			
<b>Zoom In, Zoom Out</b> Pearl Chen			



CELIA CHARI | *A Year Like No Other* | Hand-processed watercolor

CELIA CHARI

## A Year Like No Other

When we were first advised to isolate at home in March 2020, I was naively looking forward to having more time to read through papers, start at-home workouts and cook new recipes. However, that quickly changed when I realized we would be in it for the long haul. Like many other graduate students, I was frustrated with the lack of progress of my lab-based work and felt like my research was being set back by months. I struggled to find the motivation I needed to complete simple tasks, but with time I realized that I had to make the best out of a bad situation. I tried to separate my working week from my weekends, and mindfully chose activities that brought me joy.

To take my mind off all the chaos, I started drawing and painting more frequently, sending my artwork to my family back home in Ireland and Spain. I wanted them to know that I missed them profoundly, but that I was also staying safe at home. Being an international student during this troublesome year added another tier of worry and heartbreak that is difficult to describe. Yet, seeing my parents display my art on their walls, like they once did with my macaroni art as a child, made me feel lucky to have their warmth and support despite the distance between us. This deeply encouraged me to continue working on my art.

I also took this time to go on socially distant hikes and isolated getaways within Los Angeles County, where I came across colorful materials in nature that inspired me to make my own paints. I am a materials scientist with a passion for cultural heritage and art conservation science, so I was excited to start my own little laboratory of art materials at home. I did this by using hand-picked mineral and organic pigments that I could process into watercolors and inks following the instruction of Prof. Sandy Rodriguez. Her class on Visual Narratives and Colors of the Americas was a highlight of my year, providing both the historical and technical context that helped me learn how to process natural pigments.

The painting that I submitted to Art of Science is a map that summarizes all the places that I visited in the last year, made entirely from watercolor paints that I made by hand. The colors were chosen carefully to represent some key features. For example, the highways were painted with hematite ( $\text{Fe}_2\text{O}_3$ ) to represent my travels as veins, which kept me revitalized and energized during this last year. The yellows of the land were made from turmeric and goethite ( $\text{FeO(OH)}$ ), while the ocean was made from malachite ( $\text{Cu}_2\text{CO}_3(\text{OH})_2$ ) and Maya blue. The greens were made from antlerite ( $\text{Cu}_3(\text{OH})_4$ ) and a combination of my blues and yellow, representing the flora of SoCal. The black details were all made from magnetite ( $\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4$ ) that was collected by dragging a massive magnet on the ground during hikes (think pet rock on a leash). The pink (used for my clothes) was made from cochineal insects, while the purple was made from logwood ink.

The personal narratives illustrated in the map reflect my adventures in Los Padres National Forest (where I saw a tiny frog and a rock shaped like a butt), Lebec (where I stayed at a llama farm), Calabasas (where I went to a drive-thru carved pumpkin exhibit), Mojave Desert (where I tried to stay in my bubble of isolation, despite bumping into people without masks), Acton (home of my malachite and magnetite), Caltech (represented by a turtle), Jurupa Mountains (home of my hematite and goethite), and Idyllwild (did you know their Mayor is a dog called Max??).

‘A Year Like No Other’ serves as a personal reminder that not all of this year was wasted. I was still able to make new memories and learn about materials and processing methods in a unique way, despite all the roadblocks.



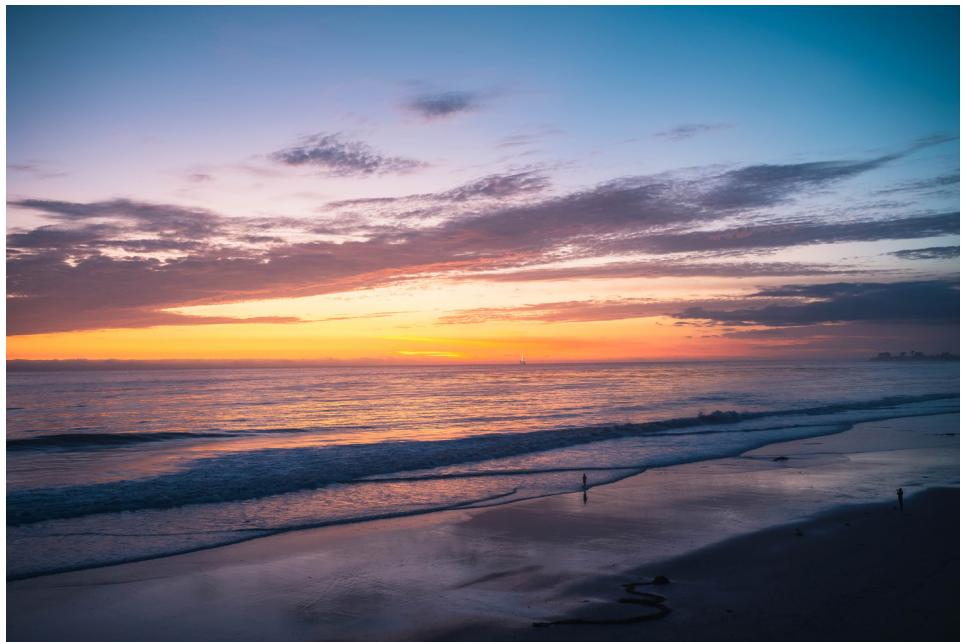
WEILAI YU | Arch of Beckman Institute | Photography

Weilai Photo



WEILAI YU | Big Bear Lake | Photography

Weilai Photo



WEILAI YU | Color of 2021 | Photography



WEILAI YU | Color of Fall | Photography



WEILAI YU | Dream of Caltech | Photography

GENNADY GORIN

# Cowcatcher

These are the broad strokes of what happened. L is having a lunch in Burbank with his date, F; F is vegetarian; they meet at one of the hipper restaurants at the triune conjunction of Burbank - Glendale - Griffith Park, yet one of many. They're out of doors, the weather is perfect, the pandemic is near extinguished, subtly avoided, gently sidestepped in their conversation, a bad dream, the joy of relearning their own pitches, bristling with the regular and embroidered with the fun and idiosyncratic, outweighing commiseration. It is not yet fire season, there is no haze. The mountains are deceptively deep. L finds it hard to focus on the conversation and begins to daydream.

He takes this for granted, perhaps naively. When L falls asleep and wakes up, is L still L in any meaningful sense? Nature works because of symmetries. L is still L. Nobody forfeited the symmetries governing the constellation of atoms in his body. But how does L's mind make its way back from its journey? The mechanism is mercifully obscured, occluded, seen through a glass, darkly, the sharp edges are sanded away, the track switches, the train passes without so much as a jolt. Yet without the comforting implacability of symmetries, the mechanism can break down - everybody dreams and daydreams; everybody L has ever met; everybody L will never meet; the lost seagull perched next to L and F, surveilling with mad beady eyes, too; the lobster at the bottom of the lobster tank at the restaurant next door, conscious, lost in confusion but conscious, aware, murky perspective, alien perspective through water and glass, the lobster can't snap, can't move, the fur on his claws bristles, meditative calm, waiting, but all of it superfluous, embarrassing, pedestrian, compared to the signal of I AM I AM I AM I AM I AM, orthogonal

to the west side of the tank, to the north side of the tank, to its bottom, orthogonal to all three, beam of I AM I AM I AM I AM piercing through total darkness in that direction, no more is necessary, I AM I AM I AM I AM fading out, the lobster begins to dream, dark and watery, molting, decomposition, a legend of whalefall, the beam falters; finally, even the bamboo shoots on L's plate, grilled, no longer alive, but the dreams are stored and latent, there is nowhere for them to go, an echo of I AM I AM I AM, being, awareness, slow but awareness, memory of shoot from seed from blossom from shoot from seed...- what seems like ad infinitum, but a vague and menacing darkness, no genesis, just a fading void, yawns further back. The mechanism works, works, works, keeps working, the gears turn, I AM I AM I AM leaves, travels; the gears slip. For the first time, the mechanism fails.

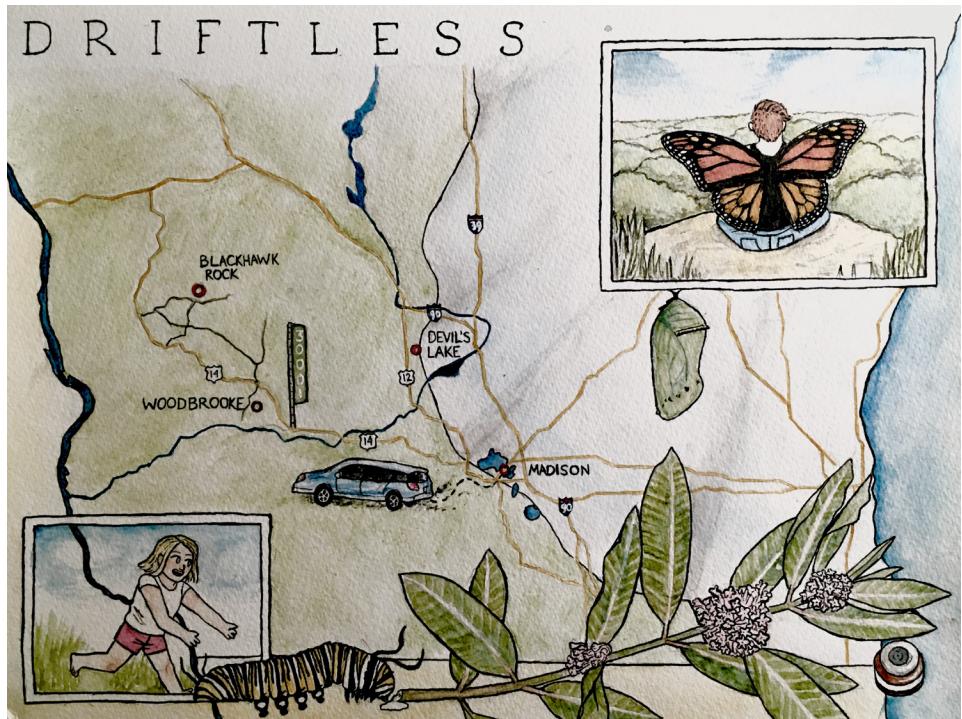
L is in Burbank, daydreaming, the Santa Ana wind coming down from the mountains, then he is nowhere at all, gasping, transforming like spawning salmon, he was on the train, the tracks switched, now he's off, in a bubbling turmoil, swept off by a cowcatcher into a boiling sea, tracks visible but rapidly diminishing, replaced by his own frantic, chaotic efforts to reconstruct them, but aimless, nothing to grasp onto, the tracks are quickly forgotten, replaced by the sea, now wine-dark, now dappled with veins of gold and turquoise and lapis lazuli; California is lost, something is gained, memories of another wine-dark sea, not his, but at this point it's vulgar to claim belonging or property; the few things that belong to him, night in Santa Monica, gleaming gloaming waves breaking at the pier, astringent blue berries scattered like jewels, astringent betel nut, astringent persimmon, the Santa Ana wind, again, forecast by the television the day

before and, symmetrically, forecasting the arrival of F half an hour earlier, dry and hot on his face, welcome relief, reminder that he is chemically bound to the world around him, a reminder that has now been categorically shown to be wrong, he is not bound to anything anymore; the belongings are lost, vaporizing off, leaving only the hint of a memory of a suggestion of astringency, the I AM I AM I AM signal is in panicked overdrive, flashing beam, incongruous lighthouse in a winter forest, but the primal lizard fear rears its lizard head too, lizards experience fear and birds experience fear and crabs experience fear, but jellyfish cannot, but the Portuguese Man O' War can, not its own, but the fear of a paralyzed fish, the fear of a diver emerging from darkness into its tentacles, there are no hard and fast rules, I AM I AM I AM, still incongruous, but now surrounded by the scent of DANGER, a lit oil lamp suspended by spiderwebs in a disused attic, the dust hangs heavy, suspended in mid-air and in the instant before deflagration and immediate annihilation; fear and danger, overlaid on remains of the astringency of an unripe persimmon, astringency is the solvent that remains when perfume evaporates, the closest tie between the body and the I AM, the sensation of a throat struggling to swallow air in big cold gulps, until it's gone too and L is adrift.

After that, a lot of time, very little happens. L wakes up, a curtain of fog and smoke and haze between him and the colors of a wild, chaotic sundown, stars and galaxies violently pinned and static on a bright sidereal purple velvet. Land rises around him, no context and no reference and nothing to rest the eye on, the cliffs are scale-free, no trees for comparison, bare rock, they could be hills or they could be mountains, the sand is scale-free too, it sifts, but hurts to think about,

could be the forgotten sand at Santa Monica or could be the remembered but forever lost sand under the whalefall or could be something too fine to grasp, finer than silt or clay, how far can it go? And L realizes that the end is near, the cliffsides are polished by a cold wind, the purple velvet shimmers and dims, the sidereal stars blink out, if L could look orthogonal to the scene, he would almost see the tiny, thumbnail-sized tapestry of silk and gold thread he inhabits, no doubt already separate from the unfathomable tapestry that contains California and whalefalls and comfortably cold stars and every other siren of I AM I AM I AM but beautiful in its own right, he does not notice the scorpion man behind him, and he does not feel the sting.

# DRIFTLESS



DANNY WENDT | Driftless | Hand-processed watercolor

*Featuring* JACK ARMSTRONG, SPACE COWBOY

VISIT THE  
DESERT WORLD OF  
*Windhole* ...

# FINAL FRONTIER

EP LVVI: THE PENULTIMATE DROP

JENNAH COLBORN | Final Frontier | Digital

*Featuring*

JACK ARMSTRONG, SPACE COWBOY

VISIT THE  
JUNGLE WORLD OF  
*Lothlorian*

# "THE FINAL FRONTIER"

EP XXXIV : WELCOME TO THE JUNGLE

JENNAH COLBORN | Final Frontier | Digital

*Featuring* JACK ARMSTRONG , SPACE COWBOY

VISIT THE  
OCEAN WORLD OF  
*Ocultaum* ...



# THE FINAL FRONTIER

E.P. XVII : MONSTER FROM THE DEEP UNSEEN

JENNAH COLBORN | Final Frontier | Digital



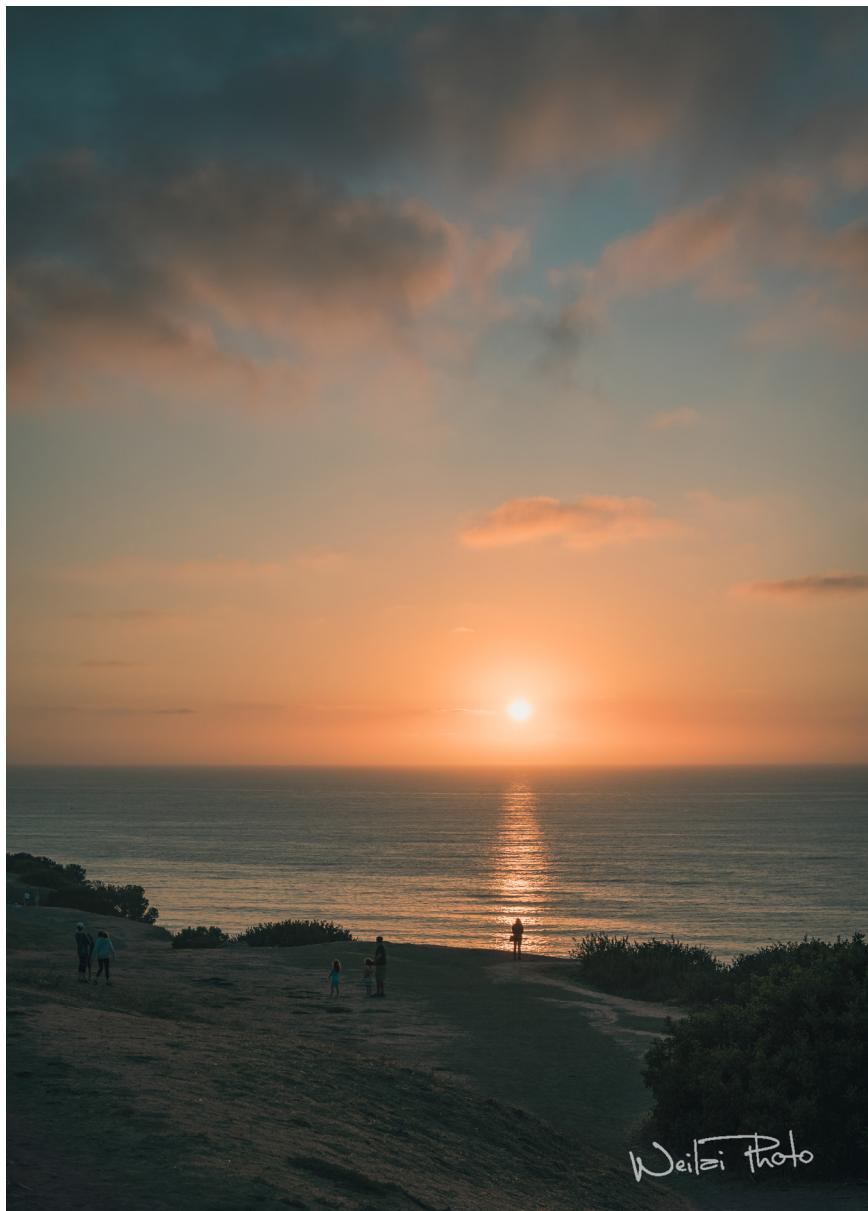
CELIA CHARI | Flower Medley | Watercolor



NORA GRIFFITH | Looking Closely at the Flowers | Digital



KATELYN LEE | Mile Markers | Digital Collage



WEILAI YU | Palos Verdes Sunset | Photography

Weilai Photo



LIAM SILVERA | Piper | Photography



NORA GRIFFITH | Sandy Sunrise | Gouache

JENNY JI

# Scene

It seemed that for the past five years, the grandfather clock's hands had been permanently stuck, hovering right before twelve and occasionally twitching in place but never once quite hitting it. It was hard to tell if the aged clock had its final moments of working glory at noon or at midnight, but nevertheless, the chime never sounded.

She craned her neck to reach the clock's wooden tip, mumbling to herself the same thing for the umpteenth time as she swept a wet rag over it. "Why doesn't he ever listen to me and get rid of this useless piece of wood?" She shook her head annoyed, not sure how many times she had said the exact same words. Something caught her vision.

Her hand hovered over the glass case, frozen in silent shock as she looked to find a woman trapped inside. The woman was unfamiliar, her eyes sunken in and her hair a snowy white.

Scared, she dropped the rag, scrambling away from the clock in small steps. From a distance, she took a double take, breathing in a sigh of relief when she realized it was only the sun's glare reflecting on the glass.

Once again, she shook her head in annoyance. "Why doesn't he ever listen to me and get rid of this useless piece of wood?" She paused, wondering if she was forgetting something very important, but the thought was short-lived—the burning smell enough to distract her thoughts.

"Oh my!" she screamed in horror to find the mess on the stove, a few charred and shriveled remains of what used to be

bok choy. Her heart somersaulted as she lifted the lid on the pot. Luckily, the chicken soup had survived the disaster. At least her granddaughter's favorite dish would be servable once she was back from school, she thought while cursing, "That old man! Why would you leave something on the stove when you go out without telling me!"

Out of habit, she reached for the phone, her fingers automatically dialing the string of familiar numbers. Calling her husband, she had a million things to complain about, but the moment she heard his voice, every single insult she had prepared faded away.

"How long does it take to pick A'Miao up from school!" she chided.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

"Hello, my love, I miss you so much. I'm so glad that you still remember me. I'm on my way home. I miss you so...so much."

Beep. Beep. Beep.

A knock sounded at her door, and she rushed to open it. But when she found a girl in her twenties standing at the doorstep with a basket of fruit, her expression of disappointment was obvious. "Who are you?" she asked, racking her mind to see where she saw this girl before.

The girl only smiled before walking inside and setting the fruit on the tabletop.

"Who are you?" the woman repeated, a bit alarmed. "What

are you doing in my home?"

The girl only smiled again, "My name is Hu Miao. I'm here to take care of you."

The woman froze, her carefully guarded expression suddenly widening into a bright smile, almost as she were in a trance. "That's the name of my granddaughter too. I knew my husband should have given her a less common name!" She chuckled to herself. "She's this tall," she gestured happily to her waist, "But boy, she grows quickly. She'll grow to your height someday."

The woman reached for a framed photo. In the picture, a wide-eyed little girl in pig tails clung happily to an elderly man. "I like you. You have the same eyes as my granddaughter."

Without speaking, the girl picked up the rag still sitting on the living room floor before scrubbing away at the charred stove.

"She'll be back from school soon." The woman reached for her phone to ask why her husband was taking so long again, completely forgetting that she had a stranger in the house.

"How long does it take to pick A'Miao up from school!" she chided.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

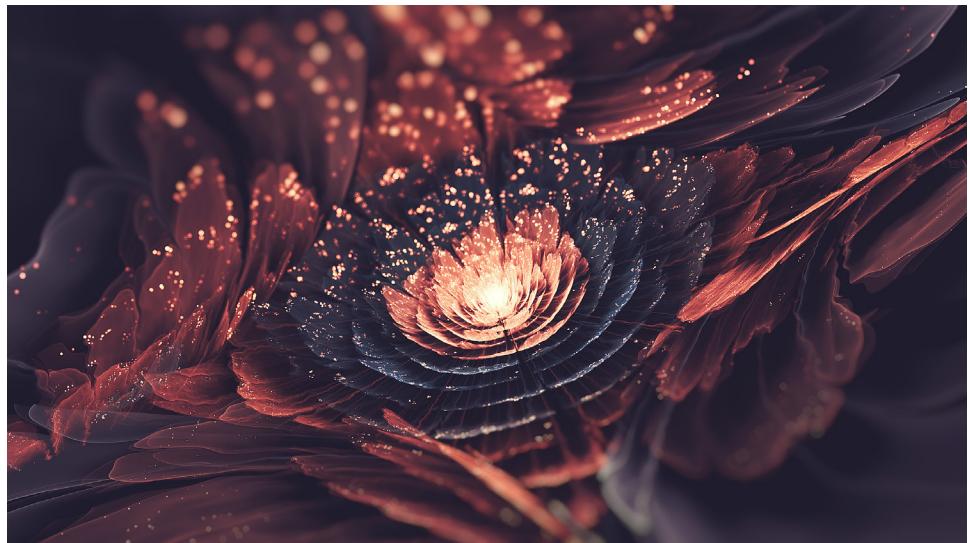
"Hello, my love, I miss you so much. I'm so glad that you still remember me. I'm on my way home. I miss you so...so much."

Beep. Beep. Beep.

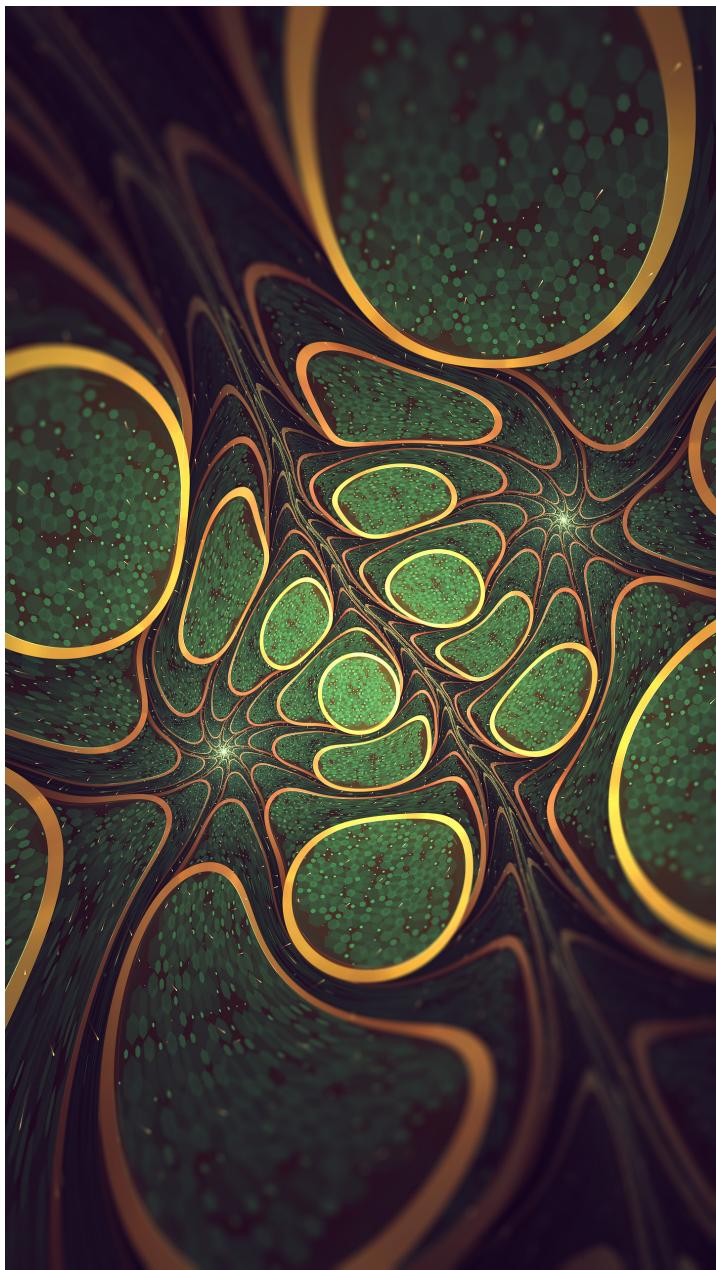
Outside, the sky was dark. The woman suddenly remembered what was so important. Reaching for the rag, she headed over to polish the clock.



LIAM SILVERA | Second Home | Photography



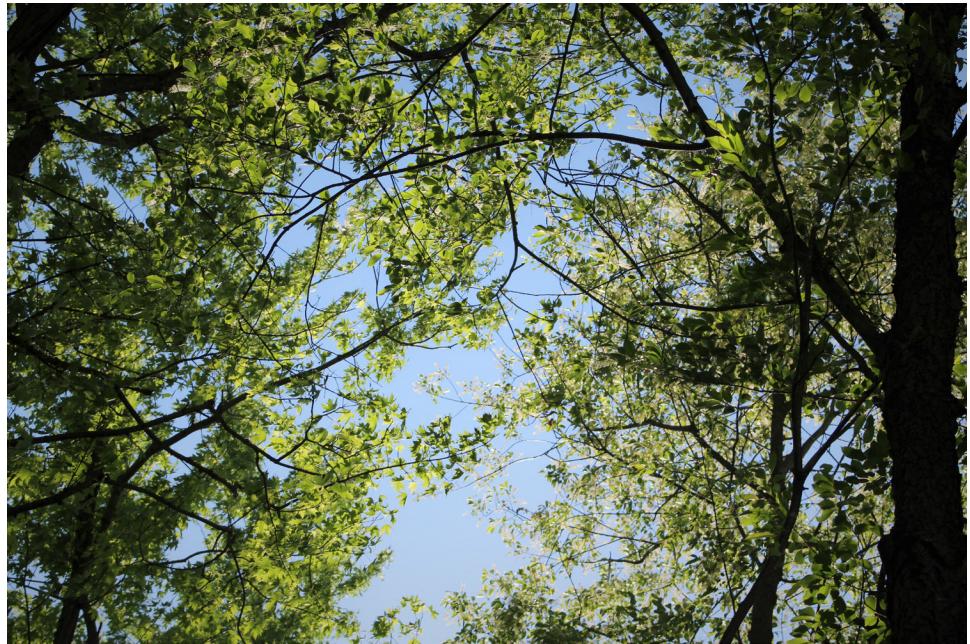
LOGAN APPLE | Sorcery | Digital



LOGAN APPLE | Wandergreen | Digital



LOGAN APPLE | Wildfire | Digital



LIAM SILVERA | Woods | Photography



PEARL CHEN | Zoom In, Zoom Out | Digital

DANIEL NEAMATI

# 3 Hours Ahead

Upon a mainly mediocre morning,

I cheerily choose to indulge in  
a languid lazy lunch.

Tender turkey on traditional toast,  
a pleasant patch of plum preserve.

And in my calm, carefree, rustic retreat,

I eye my iPhone

only

to be,

bombarded by a barrage

of

esoteric,

eclectic,

exigent,

emails.



## POETRY

Daniel Neamati

## ART

Logan Apple

Celia Chari

Pearl Chen

Jennah Colborn

Nora Griffith

Katelyn Lee

Liam Silvera

Danny Wendt

Weilai Yu

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Jenny Ji



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