

Roots & Reflections

Tarrant County College Trinity River Campus Literary Magazine

2021-2022



Preface

The third issue of Roots & Reflections has felt like a renewal of sorts. Not only did we return to the classroom, allowing students a better usage of their creativity and expression, but we also better found our footing for what we as a publication wanted to be for the Trinity River community. After submitting the call for submissions, we were gratified to receive many different forms of writing and art, including screenplays, poems, song lyrics, sculptures, paintings, and even animations, all of which gave us pause as we discovered different aspects of life that our student body contended with over the past year. We only wish we had more room to display the amount of quality work that we received.

That said, we think that this year is a fantastic collection of the written and artistic talent that our TR students have. Our editors decided this year's theme would focus on reconciliation. And the pages displayed within the issue convey those emotions, uniting works of photography and poetry, painting and prose, and creation and narrative alongside each other.

Lastly, we also want to acknowledge last year's issue, which received two awards: the NCTE Superior Award and the Community College Humanities Association Second Place Award for the Southwest Region. Both of these prove that TCC's student body contains a wide array of talent, and only has further to go as we grow as a publication. As we move forward and prepare for our next issue, we ask that students who want to submit see the inside back cover, where they can access our entry form through a QR code. It's never too early to submit! Who knows: your creation might be published within our next issue.

Professor Janae Corrado and Dr. Jerrica Jordan

Faculty Co-Advisors

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 $[\]ensuremath{^*}$ Works with an asterisk have won an award for being best in their category.

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AwakeningPoem by Mary K. Maturo

I saw the sun today, felt the light hit my eyes and touch my skin like a whisper, but not a hint of its heat graced me. We have grown unacquainted with each other, he and I. And until we are close once more, why must I expect a warm hug and a friendly embrace?

Perhaps my absence has touched the ground beneath me, for I have not wandered the old paths as I should have in my year of isolation. And I must find it to be an old friend once more before it gives me a bouquet of wildflowers.

And the trees, it has been too long since I told them how lovely they look in their new clothes, for they have been stripped of their finery and bowed in grief. It is time to comfort them again, and bring them back into their colors after their season of mourning.



Silver Lining, Photograph by Mariana Leyva



The Emerald Created

Fiction by Maya Nassabian

My tears fell fast. I'd never felt this kind of pain. The pain I'd seen in movies. It felt like a thousand knives had been stabbed into my back and no matter how many I'd pull out there would still be more. I sat down on a bench outside, trying to catch my breath. The cold air scratched at my throat.

"In and out. In and out," I kept repeating.

Nothing would help it. My tears just kept coming. I looked around at my surroundings, trying to find something that would bring me back to the earth. An object, a person, anything that could help me. I saw a figure in the distance. It was blurry through my tears.

"Excuse me ma'am? Are you alright?"

The voice was muffled, as if it were speaking through a glass. I tried to respond.

My body had shut down and the only thing it could do was cry and make a weird groaning noise. The voice sat next to me on the bench, their presence exuding warmth.

"Hey, it's okay, it will be okay," the stranger said.

"How do you know that?" I asked, my voice sounding weak.

Hearing myself brought me back to the present. I suddenly realized how cold it was. Snow had fallen everywhere and looked as if it were glittering through

my tears. I pulled my knees in hugging myself, shivering.

I heard a ruffling sound next to me and then warmth over my body. The voice had taken off their jacket and put it on me. I took deep breaths, trying to steady myself, slowly coming back to reality.

"It's going to be ok," the voice said.

With my breathing steadier, I could finally listen to the voice. It was soft and feminine. She had one of those voices that you would want to sing you to sleep. "I don't know what's wrong, but if I have learned anything in life, it's that everything always turns out, even in the darkest of moments." Her voice sent shivers down my spine yet sent an explainable warmth through my body. "Can you look up at me, please?" she said, her voice as gentle as a mother's kiss.

Slowly I looked up at her face. Her appearance was nothing like what I expected; it perfectly matched her voice. She had curly black hair and skin that resembled the sweetest chocolate bar. Her features were smooth like she was sculpted from the most prestigious artists. The feature that stood out the most were her soft green eyes. They were like two perfect emeralds. I looked into them, my gaze feeling hollow and empty. Her eyes softened as she smiled. They looked full of life. Her gaze felt like everything that I had ever been missing, had just been found.

"Everything is okay.
You're in good hands
now," she spoke, laying her
hand on top of mine, and since
those words came out of her mouth,
I genuinely believed them.

I wiped my tears away, trying to form a smile at her. A face like that deserved a million smiles, not some snotted-up lunatic.

"Don't force a smile, let it come when it will. I know you wish it was here, and that you felt better but you don't; and that's okay because everything will turn out just fine," she said in a soft low voice. She sounded like an inspirational quote.

"I'm Emerald," she said, tucking her hair behind her ears. The name matched her perfectly.

"I-I like your eyes," I stumbled over the words. Emerald giggled and blushed looking down at the ground. I would have done anything to hear that laugh again, the laugh of angels. "My name's August," I said, trying to get my sniffling in order.

"That's a beautiful name, August," Emerald said, giving me another warm smile. That smile could cure cancer. "May I ask you what's wrong?" she said, tilting her head to the side like a dog who was just asked a question.

I looked around, trying to gather myself before making an even bigger fool of myself. I looked up at the night sky. It was black with

stars shining all the way until the ends of the earth. I turned my gaze to my surroundings, trying to ascertain where I was. I

had walked to a park I'd never seen before. There was a fountain that had frozen over along with a golden path that led around the fountain and through the snow covered trees. I had no idea how I'd gotten here or how Emerald had found me. I looked down at myself and realized I was still wearing the gross party dress Natalia had picked out for me. It was bright orange and made me look like a traffic cone. I lifted my hands and pulled Emerald's jacket tighter, my hand feeling a cold sensation; she'd been holding my hand this whole time.

I cleared my voice. "I was... there was this..." I started speaking but couldn't catch enough breath to explain what had happened. "My butt is cold," I said looking up at her. I broke into laughter and couldn't stop. Everything had suddenly become really funny. Emerald looked at me like I was crazy then started laughing herself. We both sat there laughing like old pals retelling stories of the good old days. We laughed and laughed until the cold air had made our throats hurt so bad we started coughing. Emerald and I calmed our breath and looked into each other's eyes for what felt like forever. I wish it had been forever.

"I think that was called a mental breakdown." she said, chuckling. I nodded, feeling relief stretch over my body like a blanket.

"I was at a party," I started,

already feeling the tears gather in my eyes. "It was my best friend Natalia's nineteenth birthday party. We've known each other since kindergarten. It wasn't a huge party, around thirty people. Natalia had invited all her new friends from college, which I knew almost none of. Her and I had different friend groups and she hadn't introduced me to any of hers yet. Everything was going amazing! We were all having a good time," I said, smiling at the warm memory.

I looked down at my hands, fiddling with my fingers, knowing the memory didn't stay warm for much longer. I felt my tears coming back already.

Emerald grabbed my hand again, so I continued with my story.

"It was time for the toasts. Natalia always makes everyone do toast at her parties. I went first, delivering a toast I thought she would've loved. Some bull about how we will always be friends no matter what. Next her older brother Ricardo went. I've known him for as long as I've known Natalia since we pretty much grew up

at each other's houses. Ricardo's always been a big joker, he thinks he's the funniest person he's ever met. Ricardo made a bunch of jokes about me, and Natalia and I's friendship in general which were funny. Some comments might have been unnecessary, like about our nicknames in high school. I was Ursula and she was Ariel."

"Why were those your nicknames in high school?"

"It was just like dumb kid stuff. No one believed that a fat, ugly girl could be friends with a pretty, skinny girl without blackmailing her or something. I always just ignore it," I said, trying to suppress the hurtful memories.

Emerald scoffed and let out a deep breath. Emerald pulled my face to look into her magical eyes.

"You are not fat and ugly. You're sensational," she stated.

I smiled, looking away trying to hide my flustered face.

"After Ricardo, someone else went, and then another, and another and another, all of them making more comments about me, and us in high school, and college and the rumors that I was secretly in love with her. I had just met these people and had no idea how they'd known all this personal stuff about me. Soon enough it just became a bashing of August party.

"And when things I thought couldn't get any worse, when I was already holding back tears and just laughing along, Natalia joined in. She spilled secrets I shared in high school with her, things I'd never told anyone, that I'd barely begun to understand myself. She told them everything and they all laughed like I wasn't even there. Then it hit me, how they knew all this stuff about my past; Natalia had told them. She'd told them every-

thing and made fun of me. I'd been a joke among her friends and this is what the whole party was fueled on,

making fun of me. She-she just told it to them like it was nothing! Natalia is like-"I stopped to catch my breath. I'd started sobbing again.

"Natalia was like family. She had been there through everything with me.

But she didn't care. Natalia still just told everyone my life story with no consideration for me. She just bashed all over me."

I looked up at the sky trying to process what I just said actually did happen. The only sounds in the distance were my sniffling and the crickets. It felt somehow peaceful.

"It's not like she's perfect!" I said, raising my voice, the rage filling up inside of me. "You know she's cheating on her boyfriend with some guy because he's dealing her free weed? In high school she got another kid expelled for her vandalization of the school. Her parents paid her way into college, the same college I worked my ass off to get into. I never said anything, to anyone, ever, because I'm a good friend!" I was screaming into the open air. I took a breath in and held it, the world going quiet as I did.

I let the breath go and continued, "I left the room crying, everyone laughing at me saying I couldn't take a joke. I spared one glance back at Natalia, hoping she would do something, anything. Even mouth an 'I'm sorry' to me before I left. But she just stood staring at me. I could come up with a thousand

reasons in my head why she didn't come after me, why she didn't defend me or do anything at all but..." I looked down

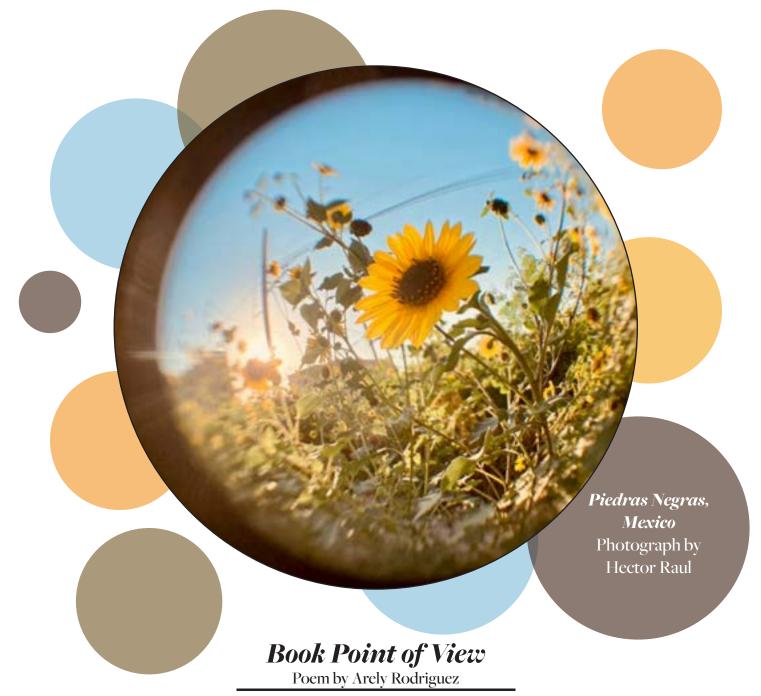
to the floor trying not to start
sobbing again. "But I'd only be
hurting myself more," I whispered in a
voice so small I could barely hear
it myself. I sat in that position, taking long breaths.

I wasn't even sure if Emerald could hear me, or if she was still there. She'd been so quiet I thought she'd left. I turned to face her. Emerald was facing forward and had tears coming from her eyes making them glitter in the moonlight. She turned to gaze into my eyes, breathing heavily. She wiped away her tears, breaking eye contact for only a second. Emerald could somehow look absolutely flawless while sobbing her eyes out.

I looked down at the ground again, feeling embarrassed at everything I'd just shared with this total stranger. I was sure my mascara was running into my eyes. I looked back up, my brown hair creating a curtain in front of my face, which was probably for the better.

Emerald reached out and tucked my hair behind my ear. "They don't deserve you," she answered with that soft smile and bewitching voice; and since those words came out of her mouth, I genuinely believed them.





Always getting randomly selected from the bookshelf.

Getting put on a desk and opening me.

Pages being folded and flipped always

gives me a headache.

And then I get closed

And put in a random place

Days pass on seeing darkness,

Until weeks later I finally get opened

And see the light of day.

Side A

Nonfiction by Casey Allen

I seem to be stuck in this sort of cycle, or loop of some sort. I have these epiphany-like episodes or moments of clarity, where I can just put things into slow motion and zoom out a bit. I'm able to assess my life in all of its aspects: my job, my education, my relationships, my habits, my self-talk. I wish I could say these moments came on winning streaks, but they usually happen right before I reach my breaking point. These moments are far from one another, but all linked together in a circular manner. It's not a scripted event either; it's more of an understood feeling or connection with myself.

Like I said, it's basically an inventory check of my existence, but it's not like I'm working down a list or something. But they're all connected, as it's the same feeling each time, and it's in the same regards. I kinda feel like it's my soul speaking, and it's like, "Yo, looks like your heart and your head just bought a one-way ticket to shit's creek, we cool?" It feels like every emotion imaginable happening all at once, but at the same time just an overwhelming feeling of pure love. It's both a romantic and comforting love that's intertwined with one another. It's like a love child of Bob Saget, Jim Morrison, and Ice Cube. A Danny Tanner hug, a hopeless love addict, and Ice Cube making that terrifying mean mug, where he Incorporates his eyebrows. And Ice Cube's got a Glock 9 pointed at your face, not because he wants to kill ya, he just loves ya, and knows you're fuckin' up. You better do what he says, or he'll kiss ya right on the lips.

I used to refer to the time in-between these experiences as rabbit holes, but luckily in recent years I've found that these events happen in a circular motion, and not a black hole. I guess you could say that means I don't have to learn

"I don't really know who I'm talking to, but at the same time it feels like I'm talking to everyone all at once. I don't even know who's still listening, but I guess all that really matters is that I say it."

everything the hard way anymore. At least most of the time, anyways.

I don't really know who I'm talking to, but at the same time it feels like I'm talking to everyone all at once. I don't even know who's still listening, but I guess all that really matters is that I say it.

So, I suppose I'll make my rounds.

A couple months back, after a streak of shitty days, I felt like I was drowning. Everything in my life was overwhelming me: work, school, relationship problems, complications with friendships, family bullshit, everything. I was drowning, so I called my older brother to save me. I exited off the highway, pulled into a gas station parking lot, took my keys out of the ignition and dialed the phone. On the days where I struggle to love myself, I remember the people that do love me, and I try to talk to as many of them as I can. I called the only other person in the world that knows exactly where I've come from. The only other person that has the same memories made up of the same Polaroid pictures and broken smells.

What he had to say surprised me. After a few minutes of interrogation-style confessions broken apart by awkward silences, he said something I won't ever forget.

"Dude, I think you have Robin Williams syndrome. I think you always have, and you always will."

I sat there in silence and waited for him to double down, but I already understood entirely what he meant by it, and I agreed with him.

"You love people so hard, and some of them don't even deserve it. You put other people's happiness before your own because you know what it's like to hurt, and you don't want anyone else to feel that way." I might have said "yeah" a few times in a cracked voice, so he knew I was on the same page as him.

"It breaks your heart that other people are heartbroken. And that fucking sucks, because everybody is heartbroken. You get your heart broken trying to fix other people's broken hearts, and it makes me fucking sick. You don't deserve it, and it's not fair. But it's the way you are—always has been, always will be."

I got off of the phone feeling so much lighter than when I had picked it up. Not to say being diagnosed with Robin Williams syndrome is most comforting thing in the wworld, but I finally felt understood by somebody. Of course, it would be my only blood brother. He was so right, in everything he said.

The only thing that I disagreed with was the part where he said some people don't even deserve it. Everybody deserves to be loved, no reason necessary. I knew what he was trying to say nonetheless, and he's my brother, so I know he truly feels the same way as I do in saying that everyone deserved to be loved. But he was right about everything else. I knew it to be true, because it broke my heart to see him heartbroken over me. His little brother.

I don't feel as though I deserve it, but I do feel that it's my duty to contribute to somebody's well-being if I'm in a position to. And yeah, sometimes I get the shit end of the stick, but that's the price you pay when you love someone. That's the risk,



The Raven, Painting by Angelina Villatoro

the gamble. But that quality is something I won't compensate for. I can't control the way people love me. I can't control IF somebody loves me. The only factor in this equation that I do have control over is the love that I have to offer someone else. I'm not going to change the way I love because it was too much for somebody else, and I know damn well that it's never been because I didn't love enough. I don't think I deserve some of the things that have happened to me, and some things that will happen in the future, but I'm not looking for sympathy. I can only control my reaction to things.

As long as I'm still breathing, I believe that things happen for me instead of to me, and that whatever happens to me is supposed to happen. Not because I deserve it, but because I will make it through it. Not around it, but through it. I believe that I'm challenged on a cellular level, in order to find a way to maneuver through it, and help as many other people through it as I can. To make people feel seen, to be heard, to be understood, to feel loved; the opposite of loneliness. I hope I do what I'm meant to do.

Always,

Casey

How Going to Military Jail Changed My Life Today

Nonfiction by Alexandria Lopez

"MA3 Lopez, you are found guilty of Article 92. You are hereby awarded reduction in rank of three pay grades, forfeiture of \$1300, and sentenced to the brig for thirty days," the Lieutenant Commander said. Tears filled my eyes as I tried to hold them in when the brig chasers entered the room. I felt the cold clasp of metal handcuffs tighten around my wrist as I thought to myself, *This can't be real*.

As I walked into the conference room to my court hearing, I was terrified of the consequences I was surely about to face. I now realized my careless actions would cause me to meet my fate. My legs were shaking, my heart was pounding, and I could feel my stomach turning itself inside out. My anxiety reached its peak as I thought of facing a room of high-ranking officials yelling at me. I hoped to soon wake up from this nightmare. But no, there he was. As I walked into the room, my eyes met the lieutenant commander as he motioned for me to sit down. He had a chiseled, kind face, perfect posture, and a smile with a hint of disappointment behind it. I thought a Court-Martial would have an audience, but it was just the two of us. This allowed me to relax a bit.

"You can go ahead and sit down, ma'am," the officer said. "Just sit down and try to relax. We're just going to go over your case here, and just try to answer honestly to the best of your ability."

I felt the cold table under my fingertips as if I tried to prove myself, yet again, that this was all real. I watched the Lieutenant Commander shuffle through thick packets of papers as I stared at him with giant, doe eyes. I was surprised at how nice he was and wondered if he would lower my punishment; however, that wasn't the case. I was fooled by the kind face that stared back at me.

We often don't think about our actions having consequences. Maybe we think we're invincible to the world or that if we're a good person, nothing bad will ever happen to us. That's what I thought. I was a naïve girl who was rushed into the military lifestyle. I had to grow up fast. Before I entered the Navy, I came from a strict, sheltered household; I never experienced real-life problems. Growing up, I was like a blank piece of paper floating around the world undamaged. Being in the Navy was as if that piece of paper was thrown into a busy city where it was trampled and scrawled with profanity. Needless to say, it was a rude awakening for me. I wasn't strong enough yet to have a voice. I tended to be a follower, afraid of being disliked by others. Maybe if I learned to stand up for myself, despite the peer pressure to fit in, I wouldn't have ended up in this mess.

I worked at a nuclear submarine base that had strict rules and guidelines. It also required people to have a certain security clearance to even enter the area. With this being said, one of the major rules for us to abide by was to not bring a cell phone into restricted areas. While this was an easy enough rule to follow, the reality is that it was often ignored. We worked sixteen hours in a day, armed with fifty pounds of gear, where we checked the credentials of people entering the restricted area. We also made sure people en-

tering didn't have any weapons, cellphones, or contraband three months of investigation, that I found out my friend on them that could be a threat to others. It became awfully boring and hard to stay awake since there was no source of entertainment; no televisions, playing cards, music, or books were allowed. The only source to made it through the day as our watch partner. After rotating around with thirty people in our sections and being with that same person for sixteen hours a day, we started to run out of things to talk about. This resulted in everyone secretly bringing in their phones to stay entertained.

It became unspoken rule an amongst us all to look out for each other whenever we brought our phones.

"Are you snitch?" someone asked when I joined the section.

"No," I replied, wondering what she meant.

"Good," my coworker said, pulling out her phone.

I knew it was wrong; we all did. But after three years of doing our job well, not getting caught, and making it through the day, it became easy. I brought my phone to work every day, just like everyone else.

During my third year stationed at my command, I made a conscious decision to bring my cell phone to work to take a picture

No Stars, Just Stripes Drawing by Sebastian Navarro

of our schedule. Even though it was in a restricted area, I thought it was harmless to share it with my coworkers. Unfortunately, one of my friends that I sent the picture to, who brought her phone to work as well, reported me to the chain of command. As a result, I was placed under investigation and my phone was given to NCIS.

It wasn't until the day of my court hearing, after prepared for the fallout.

had reported me. I was handcuffed and sent to the brig, which in civilian terms meant military jail. All different types of emotions went through my head when I felt the cold clasp of the handcuffs tighten around my wrist: anger, hurt, embarrassment, betrayal, and vengeance. I wanted to tell everyone that this is what we all did and that I wasn't the only one. But I didn't. I had no one to blame but myself because, in reality, I was told to follow a rule that I simply

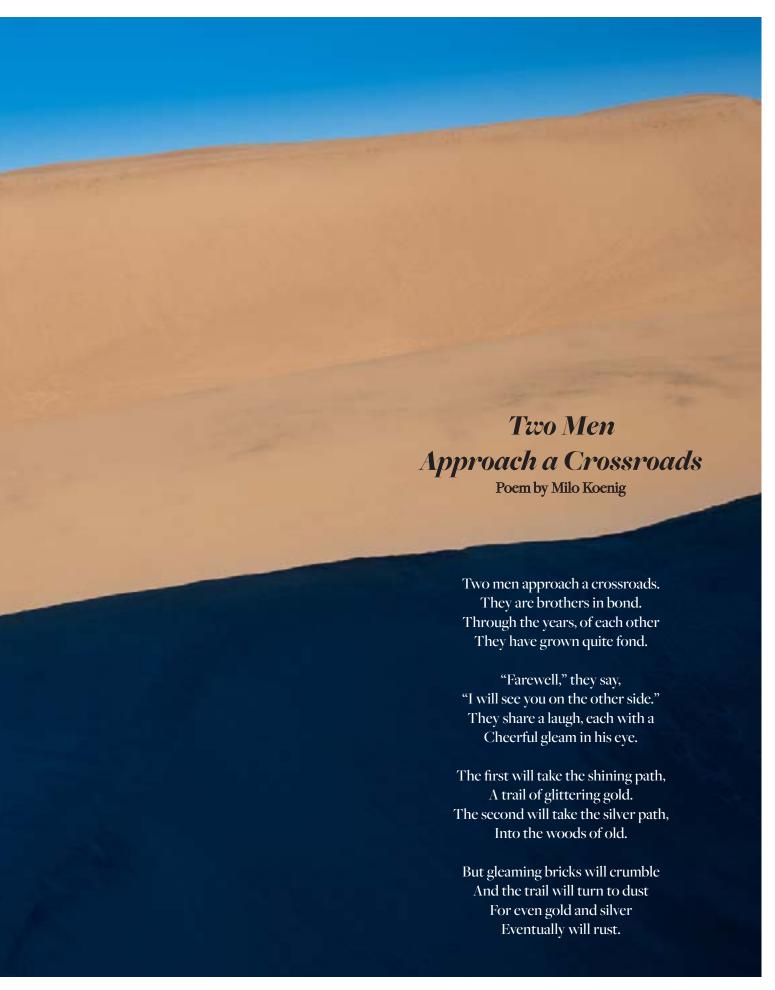
> ignored. Why should I drag everyone else into this mess just because of my own actions?

> After all that time sitting in the brig by myself, I came to realize that with my actions came consequences. Despite how I felt, I was in the wrong. I decided to come to peace with that and turned it into a learning lesson. We may not like rules and following guidelines, but we must ask ourselves: Is short-term gratification really worth jeopardizing your career? This experience was a real eye-opener for me. Despite the nightmare, I went through. I needed it to grow.

> When something bad happens, you have three choices: let it define you, let it destroy you, or let it strengthen you. In the

end, this experience defined and strengthened me. I'm no longer angry with what happened. I'm content with the outcome and the situations I was strong enough to overcome. I now go about my life cautious of the effects of my actions. We should all remember that there are always consequences to our actions. Before you act, make sure you're





THE WICH Screenplay by Alex Suarez

SYNOPSIS

In the year 2184, after nuclear war has caused widespread destruction, the world is left with two boys, James and Daryl, as well as many roaches. The boys are starving and a sandwich magically appears between them.

CHARACTERS

JAMES:

Teenager who takes on an adult role. He is pretty smart and maintains a somewhat sarcastic tone. He always seems to have a comeback to any dumb remark made by Daryl.

DARYL:

Also a teenager. He is not the brightest, but he knows what's up when chaos ensues. He always takes James seriously.

KING ROACH:

King of the Roach Kingdom.

THE ROACHES:

Group of three mischievous cockroaches who try to steal the sandwich from the boys.

Scene I: The Tale of the Magical Sandwich

James's and Daryl's camp. Day.

JAMES

It's literally been seven months since the Earth was destroyed by nuclear bombs and there really isn't one thing in this damn Earth we can eat.

A sandwich falls out of the sky an lands between the boys.

DARYL

(shocked and somewhat emotional)

Whoa! That was kind of weird. Could this be (pause) a gift from the people above? Lord, if you are hearing this, it feels like forever since I watched one single television show.

DARYL gets on his knees and starts mumbling gibberish under his breath.

JAMES

No, you imbecile! It's obviously a delicious, meaty, savory sandwich. So, uh, should we eat it?

DARYL

No! Are you crazy? This is like the very last sandwich to ever be on this planet Earth. We need to save it as an artifact.

DARYL aggressively snatches the sandwich off of the ground and starts caressing it, as if it were a baby.

JAMES

Daryl, are you really that stupid? We are the last two guys on Earth; we cannot birth a child, and—if anything—this "artifact" you want will only become a shrine in a museum built by cockroaches for cockroaches. (pause) You know, I've always wondered how you were one of the last to survive if you are this incompetent.

DARYL

(seriously; pantomiming each action as he says it)

Well, it's quite easy actually. All you have to do is step over anything that looks out of the ordinary, kick everything else that tries to eat you, and eat all the things that look somewhat normal.

JAMES

(confused, but sort of impressed)

You know, I could possibly use you as a human shield.

JAMES and DARYL huddle around a trash fire.

Scene II: Tale of the Mutant Roaches

James and Daryl's camp. Day.

THE ROACHES congo line from stage right before quickly turning toward the boys and snatching the sandwich away. JAMES, DARYL, and THE ROACHES play a monkey in the middle-esque game, JAMES and DARYL put their differences away in order to try to save their precious sandwich.

DARYL

(yells)

What are these things and why did they take the precious artifact?

JAMES

(alarmed)

You mean the food?!?

THE ROACHES

THE ROACHES form a circle, chanting in unison.

Food, food, we will eat the food! Food, food, we will eat the food!

One of THE ROACHES goes out of the chanting circle, raising the sandwich up to the sky as if it were holy. KING ROACH enters.

KING ROACH

This sandwich here is the start of a new era, the start of something beautiful, the start of a new beginning!

JAMES

It's literally just a sandwich. Now hand it back; we're both starving and this one over here is going kind of delusional.

DARYL

Yeah this dude is kind of coocoo, so if you could just hand over the baby we'll be on our way. Please and thank you.

KING ROACH looks back in disgust.

KING ROACH

Who dares disturb the roach eating ceremony!

DARYL

(fearful, but trying not to show it)

I'm sorry sir, it was all my friend here, he's the one that wants to eat the sandwich, by all means go ahead and take it and do whatever type of devil worship you're doing to it.

KING ROACH

Silence, child! And you, does this kid not have an off button? I'm trying to make this eating ritual special and he won't shut up!

JAMES is frozen in fear.

JAMES

Uhhhh no sir, we are human, we can't be shut down like any ordinary A.I.

KING ROACH

Oh, never mind that, you pest, the ritual must go on!

THE ROACHES gather around the sandwich once more, and begin dancing and chanting in their own little cockroach language. JAMES tries to walk toward them, but is held back by DARYL.

JAMES

(stammering)

Oh, yeah?! Well if it weren't for these pests you wouldn't have a sandwich, (under his breath) stupid.

DARYL

(ecstatic)

Yeah! If it weren't for the weird apocalyptic oozy substance that made you huge, we would have crushed your asses!

King Roach nods, signaling for THE ROACHES to pick up and take the boys offstage, to a jail cell in the roach kingdom.

Scene III: The Tale of Two Sandwiches

The Roach Kingdom Jail. Time of day is ambiguous. It has been five days since the boys were locked in their jail cells by the abnormal roaches. They are starving; the image of the sandwich still in their minds.

DARYL

We wouldn't be here if you just saved the sandwich.

JAMES

Well maybe if you didn't say we would crush their asses we would have been able to keep the sandwich.

KING ROACH enters, moving to center stage between the two jail cells. THE ROACHES follow, acting as bodyguards.

KING ROACH

Hahaha! Now, now, human pests, calm down. We roaches have come to an agreement. That ritual you saw us performing was a cloning ritual. (louder, with authority) Now we have two sandwiches!

DARYL

(dumbfounded)

So what you're telling us is that we both get a baby.

JAMES sighs loudly in anger.

JAMES

Daryl, can't you see? They're rubbing it in our faces. They get twice the amount of sandwiches while we starve. For all we know, they're punishing us for all the cruel things we've done to them throughout history.

BODYGUARD ROACH

(with surfer accent)
 Yeah, this is for our ancestors, dude!

KING ROACH

(loudly, with authority)

Silence! We do have two sandwiches and you do each get one, but there is one small catch!

JAMES

(sarcastically)
Oh, great. What could it be now?

DARYL

(overthinking the catch)

Gosh, what if they got us a drink with the sandwiches, or maybe some chips? Hopefully they're gluten free, not that I want to eat a delicious, meaty hunk of junk.

KING ROACH

Fools! Shut up! Your sandwiches are poisoned, or least one of your little precious ones. I had my chef poison one of them so one of you will die!

KING ROACH laughs maniacally.

JAMES AND DARYL

(In unison)
What the hell we gon do (pause) now?

JAMES

(desperately)

Daryl, I need you to listen to me! If I end up getting the poisoned sandwich, as my last words to you, I want you to know that I love

you. You were like my little brother I lost during the nuclear war. You kept me happy throughout this whole time. I love you, Daryl. I really do.

KING ROACH

(with emotion)
Bring out the sandwiches!

The sandwiches are rolled out on two trays. JAMES and DARYL reach out for each other's hand, but fail, and are given the sandwiches.

DARYL

(tearfully)

James, I've only survived with you by my side. If I lose you, I lose everything.

As both boys are about to bite into their sandwich, KING ROACH, THE ROACHES, and JAMES freeze. DARYL turns to the audience.

DARYL

I could sense I had the sandwich without poison. I knew that if I didn't have James by my side, I wouldn't be able to survive. I wanted him to at least have some more time on this Earth. He deserved it, and without even thinking I-

KING ROACH, THE ROACHES, and JAMES unfreeze.

Hold on! I want his sandwich. It's the perfect sandwich for my museum.

KING ROACH

(impatiently)

Oh my gosh. If we switch the sandwiches, will you just shut up?!

DARYL

Yessum!

KING ROACH

Fine! Switch the sandwiches! As long as one of you dies, I'm good.

KING ROACH snaps his fingers, commanding THE ROACHES to switch the sandwiches. JAMES bites into his sandwich, with fear in his eyes. DARYL bites down on his sandwich with a smile on his face.

DARYL

I love you, James.

DARYL falls to the ground, choking on the foam coming out of his mouth. KING ROACH and THE ROACHES exit the stage while KING ROACH laughs maniacally.

JAMES

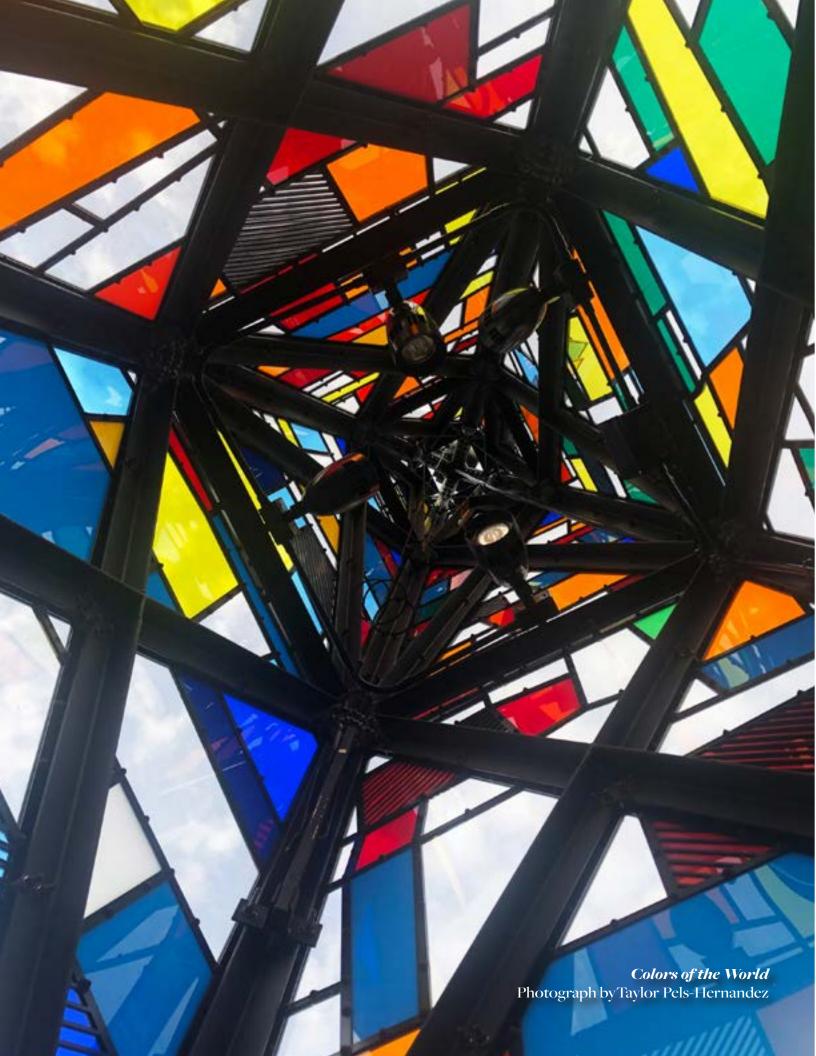
(with rage)
How dare you, you filthy roach! You will pay
for this! You murdered an innocent child! You
ugly roach!

JAMES sobs and kicks his jail cell. Stage lights dim.



Nissin, Animatic Still by Mary K. Maturo To view the animatic, please use this QR code.







Vigilance

Poem by Rene Herrera

Let me say something about vigilance It's somethin' you all lack Alongside persistence You let the machine rise As you keep watchin' others die What is the price of life If you keep turning a blind eye? Eyes sewn shut As we walk into annihilation Media whores and the affluent Don't receive their due retaliation Only vigilance will get us fixed So let me beseech you Light a fuse that will reach you Tear the thread that blinds See ignorance and all her lies

Disguised as a societal fine Prostituted out for mankind A cheap and easy fix As the elite keep getting rich While others grow more sick Free your mind Take your truth back Use the first then plead the fifth When they arrest 'Cause lord knows We won't let them rest Always stay vigilant See their deception Let there never be any exceptions As they try to justify Their accession

Toxic Perfection

Nonfiction by Maddy Zamora



I Saw Him In The Desert Once, Digital Art by Mary K. Maturo

have always been complimented whenever I play my saxophone, even by other musicians. This is why, when my band director asked me to perform at a solo and ensemble competition, I quickly accepted. Being a junior in high school, I thought of this as an opportunity to learn. However, I developed a negative standard for myself and no longer competed only against others, but against myself; I became a dreaded perfectionist.

Every day was spent practicing in a cold, quiet, and lonely room for an extended period. I was always anxious whenever practicing at school because I didn't want to make a mistake on my scales, warmups, or the music piece I chose to perform. When I arrived home, my day continued with more practice and a break for dinner, if I was lucky.

When the day of the solo and ensemble arrived, I was ready. The morning went by fast, was long and my mind was filled with unrealistic scenarios, such as forgetting my music or my instrument breaking. After parking at Greenhill School in Addison, I wobbled out of the car with my uncomfortable high heels and walked to the auditorium saxophone in hand. While walking across the parking lot, and the courtyard I was only focused on what I needed to accomplish during my performance, and that was me scoring a one on my score sheet: the highest score possible.

Solo and ensemble ratings are focused on tone quality, technique, interpretation, accuracy, and appearance. The person performing receives a rating of or between and depending on how well the piece is played, the person will receive a rank of superior, excellent, good, fair, or poor.

After arriving at the auditorium, I noticed a number of anxious kids playing music on their instruments, pacing across the room, or talking to each other about how nervous they were, depending on how well the piece is performed. I got my instrument out of the heavy case and began warming up on the cold keys of my saxophone. I began feeling uneasy and told my mom, "Hey, I'm going to get some fresh air and I'll be where you can see me."

My mom replied, "I want to go outside with you, then."

"No, please. I'm getting really nervous and need some alone time."

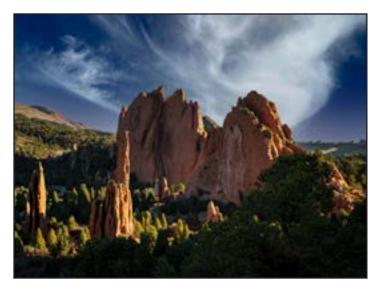
"Ok, fine, but I don't understand why you won't let me go."

I walked out the front doors of the auditorium and sat in the courtyard. I have always walked away from

a situation to catch a breath whenever I felt nervous or needed to compose myself. I developed this habit in my earlier years, when I felt a lot of pressure on was given corrections from my family, especially from my mother.

I took some routine deep breaths and resisted my usual affirmations, trying to calm myself down, and for the moment it worked, until I heard my mom yell, "Look at that peacock!"

I opened my eyes to see a beautiful, multicolored bird and instantly became aware of the school's prestige. I then felt more uncomfortable, but not because of the mature looking short bodycon dress my mom had me wear, or because of the high heels that made my feet feel as if I was walking on pins and needles. No, I felt uncomfortable because I felt out of place. I became aware that the school I came from, looked the opposite of the school where I would soon be judged. Obsessive thoughts started run ning through my head.



Garden of the Gods, Photograph by Grant Helenbrook

I began to question myself. Do I need to play to a higher standard? Am I good enough? Do I look nice? I then cut my familiar routine of breathing exercises short and headed straight inside to quickly perfect anything I might have trouble with. Soon I heard my band director call for me. It was my turn to play. I carried my heavy saxophone across the large, beautiful courtyard in my uncomfortable shoes and entered a separate building.

My band director looked at me and reassured me, saying, "I know you're nervous, but I know you're going to do great, and just know that a piece of paper doesn't determine your worth."

Even though I knew my band director wanted supposed to make me feel better, I looked at my parents and felt worse. This was going to be one of the few times

my mom would be watching me perform, due to her often traveling to Colorado for her job. While I knew the performance wouldn't determine my worth in the eyes of God, I worried it would affect how my parents looked at me.

My band director signaled for me to enter the room. When walking in, I was welcomed by my accompanist and felt better knowing that everything was going perfectly. All I needed to do was play my music.

I began to warm up with my accompanist, and as soon as I blew the first note I was met with a startling squeak.

Oh, no. This meant unwelcome news. I kept trying to blow out my note, but all that came out was a squeak. I felt like the air was crushing me, and I did not want to give a perfect performance anymore. I now wanted to be given a chance to fail because that would mean I failed myself, on my own terms. It would have been in my control.

The judge looked over my way and stood up from his seat to make his way towards me. After further inspection he discovered that one of the keys on my saxophone had a leak, and he gave me the option to not play my music.

I was deeply upset about my instrument breaking. While pondering my decision, I thought of all the time I spent practicing and the nerves that would be wasted if I didn't play. I decided to ignore the perfectionist tendencies in my head and to perform the music piece I spent countless hours on.

Once I finished performing my piece, the judge gave me minor corrections, but not many. I walked out and looked at my mother, father, pianist, and band director, all

of whom met me with sympathetic eyes. I would be lying if I said that I stayed strong and walked out without a single tear, but I'd also be lying if I said I did not learn anything from this experience.

As I cried, my mom walked up to me and gave me a big hug,

"Stop crying," she said.
"I'm really happy that I got to see you play. Plus, this is something that one day you will use in another area in your life, and you will be able to

handle that moment whenever you come across it."

Butterfly to Heavem, Painting by Taylor Pels-Hernandez

The moment I got back into the car, I realized that no matter how hard I work to be perfect, it's not going to happen. Instead, I need to have grace.

Through this whole experience, I learned about the weaknesses that I possess, and, instead of trying to perfect them, I now work with them.



Imperfection Poem by Kari Davis

As I lay here
Brown and dying
I watch the birds flying
And the baby deer lying
I see my reflection
In the stream below
The water with a perfect flow
Not too fast, nor too slow I watched
myself ripple

Twisted into many ways
Under the perfect rays
Hoping one day I'll have my day
Only if I stood straight
I would be noticed for more
Possibly a hardwood floor
Or even a church door
Only if I stood straight

Would someone want me
No imperfections for them to see
But this is not who I am to be
So, as I
lay here brown and dying
My imperfections make perfection
To the birds flying
And the baby deer lying.



To the Moon and Back: Why the Hope of Meeting My Love Absolutely Terrifies Me

Nonfiction by Milo Koenig

Ding!

The orange-yellow glow of the seatbelt sign cut through the dim lights as it clicked on. The captain's voice echoed through the speakers, letting the passengers know that we were nearing the end of our flight. The plane's engines hummed under the strain of thousands of pounds of luggage and passengers. I knew that the probability of a crash this late in the flight was low, but I couldn't help gripping my seat as we started to descend.

For as long as I can remember, I've lived in my head, making up little memories and scenarios to replace the not-so-pleasant ones I had to endure. This is one I've been entertaining for a while, and when I finally do make the decision to hop on an international flight to spend a summer with a friend I've never seen before, I'll have done a surprising amount of thinking and research on the matter. I know the moment we meet in person will be important to me, but I don't know how *much* humans are capable of feeling, and I'm a little afraid of finding out. After all, my past experiences with love didn't end too well.

The landing goes off without a hitch, I manage to dislodge my fingers from the arm of the seat as passengers begin disembarking.

"Thank you for flying Lufthansa Airlines."

I look for my exit and enter a small lobby. My suit-

case makes little clicks every time we go over a grout line in the tile floor, and the sound echoes, a tiny percussion instrument marking time for the chorus of beeps, whistles, and melody of different languages in the air. I look around, scanning the room for a bit before I see her. She jogs up to greet me, but is cautious about touching me at first, as if she's not quite sure what to do.

"Oh my god, you're ... You're a real person," they say with a hint of an accent.

"Uh ... yeah, last time I checked," I stammered.

Great one, Milo. Barely a minute in and you're already making a fool of yourself. You know, you should really—

"Is it okay if I hug you?" She asked, a smile punctuating the question.

I nodded quickly, feeling my grin grow impossibly wider, and held out my arms. They pulled me into a bone-crushing hug that seemed to last forever—several minutes, at least—before sighing and pulling away again to look at me.

"Shall we?" She asks, gesturing toward the exit. I nod, and we head outside. Dampness hangs in the air, but it's not muggy. Instead, it's clean and refreshing. The smell

This individual uses both they/them and she/her pronouns, and requested that I use an even mix of these pronouns when referring to them.

of rain floods my senses as they step into the street to hail a taxi. I watch the puddles on the pavement ripple as airplanes roar overhead. The taxi pulls over to the curb, tires splashing water onto the concrete. She opens the door for me in a grand gesture and tosses a smile my way.

"You ready?"

International plane tickets are expensive, but the issues I keep running into are rooted in my past experiences. My mother died when I was nine, and my father never

really knew how to be a parent. He was extremely abusive toward my sisters and me, and all of us ended up with a warped perception of what love is supposed to look like. I'm working on trying to unlearn the ideas that I developed while living with my father, but so far this has proven to be difficult. I'm scared of trusting someone that much again, because in the past, love and trust always led to pain.

I'm working on overcoming this internal struggle by almost forcing myself to trust Ebba, to "fake it 'till I make it." I can try my hardest to believe that when I take this leap of faith, she'll be there to catch me. Inti-

on getting there; she deserves someone she can depend on without reservation.

The decision to cross the ocean to meet them will impact my life significantly. The time I spend with them will most likely determine where I reside for a good part of my life, where I work, and possibly even where I finish my schooling. This decision is forcing me to face the fears and apprehensions I have about being in a relationship this meaningful.

EmpressDrawing by Angelina Villatoro

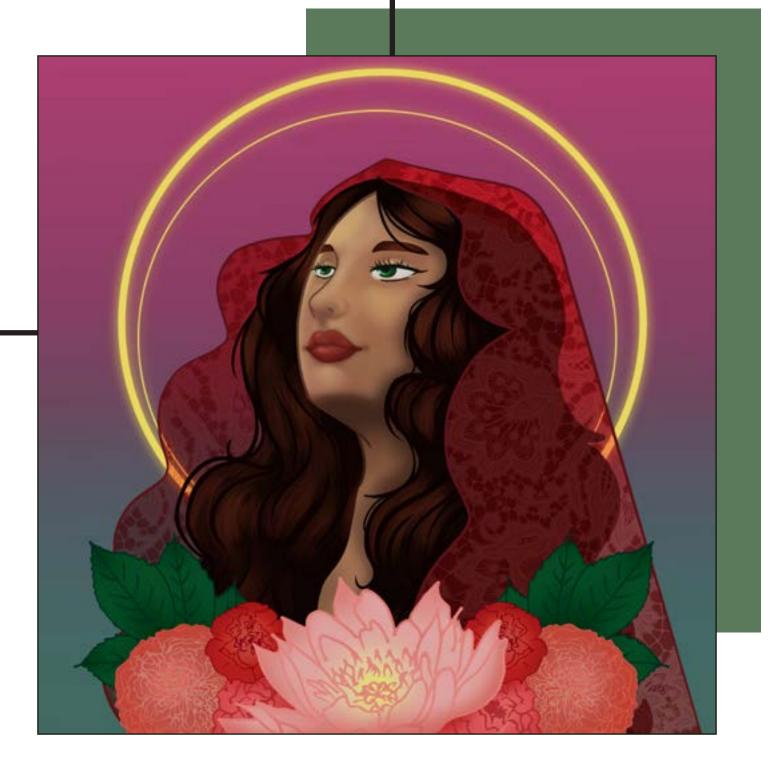
macy is crucial to any romantic (or platonic) relationship, but it requires me to be vulnerable while simultaneously believing with all my heart that the other person will not exploit that vulnerability. I have to let go of the idea that I can't trust the people I love, and I'm working really hard

make this "little memory" a reality, I won't still be terrified. I know that not everything will be picture-perfect, and that there'll likely be many waves along the way, but that's not going to stop me. My future is within reach now; all I need to do is start paddling.

Seeing her face-to-face will make it real, and I need to accept that loving relationships do not always end in disaster, and learn to love people in spite of the uncertain future.

There are some things that are so extraordinary that they wash over me, filling me up and soaking me to the bone. I suppose the problem arises when I walk out into the emotional ocean and realize I'm starting to sink. Feelings that are deep enough to drown in can be hard to explain words simply don't do them justice. What I feel with Ebba is one of these feelings.

I hope that by the time I have the opportunity to



*Holy Woman*Digital Art by Vanessa Espinosa

Turning Veins Into Gains

Nonfiction by Anonymous

"There is no magic cure, no making it all go away forever. There are only small steps upward; an easier day, an unexpected laugh, a mirror that doesn't matter anymore."

—Laurie Halse Anderson

The idea that something that was once a very dark and sad place could blossom into a greater perspective on what truly understanding and loving my body means is one of the biggest personal milestones I've accomplished to date. I could have never imagined that a decision made in one day would lead to a seemingly endless fight I had to break through for the following five years.

The First Meal Missed

Let's refer back to the year 2014; times like these were blurry, yet so distinct. I was just a kid then, twelve years old to be exact, sitting in a dark space that was my room. The only source of light came from the unfinished assignment radiating from my laptop, the smell of baked chicken wafted in from the kitchen, and the sound of laughter could be heard from my family, who was having one of our then "nightly family dinners." What seemed like a warm, inviting environment wasn't really the case.

Now don't lose me here; support systems are only half the resolution to problems such as mine. In my case, the only form of support I received came from online support groups: Tumblr pages, Reddit forums, and even online articles written by those who have gone through the same issue.

"Issue." What a seemingly simple way to put it; what a simple way to describe the indentations of bones visible through the surface layer of skin, or the uncomfortable shade of white fluorescent light glistening off the tiles of my bathroom floor.

"Simple" is a perfect way to inaccurately describe a seemingly overlooked battle that unfortunately takes the lives of 10,200 people yearly: one death every 52 minutes. Support is something I began longing for. Not the support of a significant other, friends, or even my best friend (and cat) Oliver, but the support of my family.

Fight Or Flight

"Wake up! Wake up!"

The voice was distinct, yet my head was in such a fog that I couldn't seem to put a name to it. Through the commotion of my family trying to wake me up, all I seemed to focus on were the sirens blaring and echoing through the walls of my house, the cold shiver of my skin against those all too familiar bathroom tiles. The faint weeping of my little sister caused me to feel instant regret; not even I could comprehend what was happening. At that moment, there was no stronger feeling than the pounding of what seemed to be a never-ending headache. This marked the first of many hospital visits that were to come; unlocking a memory that would later become the highlight of my physical and mental journey back to wellness.

Unfortunately, eating disorders aren't easily broken, nor are they simple to start. What seemed like a small decision to skip lunch and dinner that one day five years ago snowballed. I can make it half a day without any food then one day, I thought to myself; I'll be fine. Simple choices on meal decisions grew into a mindset: the mindset of hating food. Overcoming any mental issue can never be easy, but mix that battle with physical deterioration and you have the recipe for a fight for survival.

My Outlet

I changed my perception of my eating disorder from a controlled portion of my life to just another variable I had yet to overcome. I knew I needed something more than just a therapy session or a medication to get through this; I needed an outlet.

I am very competitive. Losing is not an option for me; whether it be a life-threatening situation or a small argument, I refuse to lose. Now I'm much too impatient for drawing. I couldn't be a poet, and I



Survivors of Domestic Violence, Painting by Danielle Mares

could never seem to get the hang of any instrument; what I do have a love for is sports. From golf to volleyball I have played it all.

Then I found powerlifting. I began weight training two years ago and I haven't stopped. Instead of mutilating and starving my body in the name of insecurities and anxiety I had built up over the years, I found an activity that not only releases any negative emotion I'm carrying but also builds and improves my physique.

Road to Recovery

With an activity that uses food as fuel for improvement, I couldn't have found a better match. Slow and steady worked for me; just a daily protein shake morphed into one meal, then two, and three. Results had their ups

and downs, andcertain days were harder than others, but it was important to understand that giving up was never an option. What good is progress if you just reform back to what you know instead of growing into a new way of life, a life to live and not just survive? For me, powerlifting was a second chance at life; a chance not to rewrite my past but to move forward into the future healthy and stable.

Trust me, my intention is not a sob story of how this disorder came to be; instead I want this to be recognized as a sign to continue my journey. But I want it to be hopeful for others as well. No matter how serious or minor, how big or small you may feel an issue is to you right now, keep going. No one likes a story with an abrupt ending, where the favorite character dies off. Let this issue be an inconvenience but not an ending. Recognize yourself as that favorite character and let life be your story.



Rue, Polymer Clay Doll by Anneliese Raya

Sonnet

Poem by Angela Halbach

I gaze into the eyes
Of that silent beast who multiplies
My woes times twenty-nine.
Fears and dread play
An act of balance, they say
As they take my mind away
Back when I could think straight.
Those were the days,
When I thought I was more than bait
For hungry wolves who can not resist
To take their share, rip, and twist.
Never quench, and never sate.
Looks like devotion, smells like hate.
When I gaze into the eyes
Of the one who brings the lies.

Death and Taxes

Nonfiction by Grace Kadia

'd like to say that death is a lively experience. I'd like to think that I was going to forget this memory along with the feelings attached to it—the shock, the disbelief, the bargaining, and currently, the reconstruction-and yet, here I am, writing about it. Remembering this shock, this disbelief, this bargaining, this pain, and I realize that this shift, turning point, monumental change—whatever you want to call it—markedly changed the way I approach my life in the most excruciating way possible. Nonetheless, I'd like to think it was for the better. Maybe it was time for a change, or maybe I needed to feel this pain in order for me to rid myself of hypocrisy and procrastination, and to at last subject myself to what I knew was best for me, what he knew was best for me.

Despite my desire to plain disregard this memory, the truth is that I recall this memory as if it had happened yesterday, and how I remember that I slept so horribly the night prior owing to an agonizing dream of being lost in the stars. Upon entry of my parents' steaming room, the sun first greeted me through the welcoming auburn-colored blinds that shielded the cascading windows, and naturally, I felt myself relax before the hair on the back of my neck began to rise and I felt the cold uneasiness glide down my spine.

The scene I came across was similar to an illusionary painting; the closer I came, the more confused I was, but in hindsight, it all makes sense. My mother and stepfather laid close while my mother attempted to collect the faucet of tears in her crumbling palms.

sprawled out on the floor of my room, which now looked just as disheveled as I felt.

The declaration of my father's passing was an indescribable feeling. Although we were never close, I was lost. It seemed as though my world, yet started, had crumbled into pieces and it left me with a sour taste on my tongue. This bitter taste, like regret

"This woman who had bore five children without a tear was now sprawled out on the bed."

This woman who had bore five children without a tear was now sprawled out on the bed. As the sun seemed to retract its warming welcome and the unease continued to seize the innocent relaxation, I froze. Speaking in dialect, her glazed eyes drooped when they met mine before extending her arms towards mine for comfort, like a child reaching for their parent. It was a bittersweet feeling as my mother and I had never been as close as I'd liked. I cautiously sauntered towards my exclaiming mother and went deaf at her words midway. I had never been one to be emotional publicly, which I never thought about until I found myself and grief, isolated me from my family and friends. I was my father's beloved, but it was strange to be known as "beloved" and yet still feel so alone. Sooner, rather than later, night overwhelmed the day and I shared a melancholy feeling with the moon; its light beckoned me to my godforsaken bed whereas my body raved to continue the reticent conversation between my platonic love with the galaxy surrounding me.

I hadn't been as close with my family, let alone my father, than I was with the moon. However, in the days preceding his death, the moon had seen me less and my father had taken the place of the moon more, hence why his passing did not promptly take me by surprise.

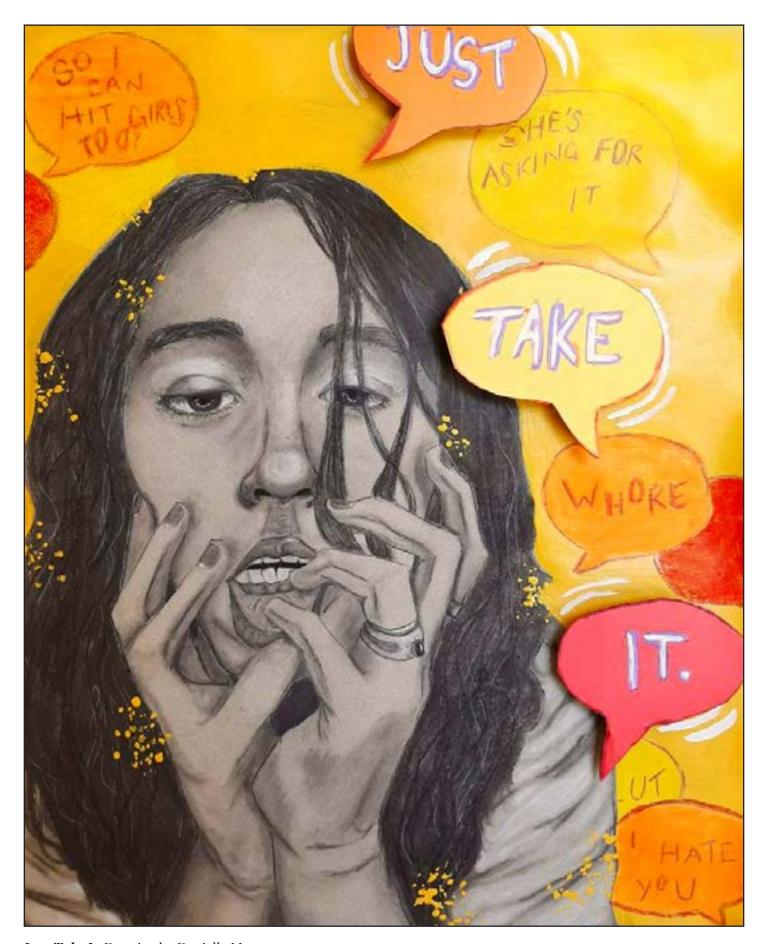
Hereafter, his passing diluted what passing away really meant to me, and the only remnant in my mind after my father's death was Ben Franklin's famous saying about death and taxes, which I had never truly grasped until the charges for the burial service came in. Back then, I hadn't soaked in what death really was and wasn't. Death is a real thing that causes real pain in real people and I wish I could've known it well before it occurred to me.

Nevertheless, I yield. This experience has made me triumphant and diligent in what I do and in what I take pride in. As the process of growing up pushes forward hastily, I still find myself musing over this moment. I now tend to run my fingers past the rigid tattoo behind my ear and remember my pain, my hardship, my destitution, and my calamity.

This reminder, forever inked onto my body, affects me with a feeling of faith, which allows me to persevere through my hardships, and for that, I choose to look up to the moon, just as I did my father, and continue the everlasting conversation that drives me to reach for the stars, as a child would their parent.



Alice and Bones, Painting by Angelina Vilatoro



Just Take It, Drawing by Danielle Mares

It is OK to Not Be OK

Poem by Karla C. Leon Jimeno

Let go your frustration, it is OK to cry An anxious heart breaks like cracking porcelain Expand your wings, fly above the sky A frozen touch of loneliness draws nigh A desperate prisoner begs for mercy in vain Let go your frustration, it is OK to cry A little doubt hammering your skull, a spy It is OK to be vulnerable, to lose again Expand your wings, fly above the sky Another empty scroll full of lies "You are such a failure," whispers your brain Let go your frustration, it is OK to cry A weakening voice of hope: "Is it worth the try?" Captive in a hellfire, like Andromeda chained Expand your wings, fly above the sky As a camel lost in the desert, hot and dry Wondering if life goes through your veins Let go your frustration, it is OK to cry Expand your wings, fly above the sky



She's Falling Apart Nonfiction by Paige Lewis

When I think of myself a year and a half ago, I remember a vibrancy to my demeanor, and there wasn't one person, not even myself, who was going to take my resilience away. March of 2019 changed that for all the future years to come. All I see now is a cold, wounded soul; any vulnerability that I had left, is gone. I have become a completely different person in areas that I didn't know needed to be changed. I never thought that I'd go through as much heartbreak in a single month as I did last year, but at the very beginning of March, I was greeted with death, depression, and sickness.

March was an experience. I will never say that it was a time I would want to live through again, but part of me is thankful for everything that I learned from it. From that time to now, I have been able to see through the lighthearted front I used to have, and genuinely work through the internal battles I was fighting beforehand. Not only that, but I realized how much I care about my family, and that no matter what, I would stick up for the people I love the most. My whole life has changed by just a thirty-day month, and the road to becoming a completely

different person started the second of March.

I remember the day like it was yesterday. It was the type of chilly where if you wore a long-sleeved shirt, you'd feel sweat on the inner corners of your elbows, but without a good pair of jeans on, you'd definitely suffer from goosebumps. Like any other day, I crawled out of bed ready to start my school day, but something about my house felt off. Usually, I wake up to my mom repeatedly ordering my little sister to wake up and get ready for school, but it was eerily quiet. The house felt lifeless, and I could hear the crisp wind brushing up against my window. Initially, I thought that my mom had slept in that day, but I knew that the tyrant of early mornings would never sleep in voluntarily. Goosebumps ran up my back. Something is wrong, I thought to myself. I walked into the living room to find my mom silently sobbing on the couch, and immediately my heart went limp.

When she looked at me, I could tell that she had been up all night crying. She collected herself, and motioned me towards

her. My mom has never been much of a cryer, so it hurt me to see her in that much distress. I remember my mom holding me tight on that couch, not wanting to let go, almost in fear that if she let go of me, I would be gone forever. The conversation felt like a never ending fever dream, and most of it went in one ear and out the other.

"I'm so sorry sweetheart, but Dylan is dead."

Anything after that was incomprehensible. I kept hearing "Dylan is dead" ring in my ear like a fire alarm on full volume, and no matter what lever I pulled, it just wouldn't stop. I sat there in silence, replaying what had just been said to me over and over again. My mother had just told me that my twelve year-old brother died in the middle of the night, but no words left my mouth. I tried to tell my mom that I loved her, wishing I could've been able to say it to Dylan before it was too late. I kept thinking to myself, "Just tell her you love her, she needs to hear it." But every time I tried to get it out, it was like burning acid had accumulated in my throat.

The week after that was filled with people sending their love and condolences with assorted chocolates, lemon bars, and homemade chicken pot pies. My mom welcomed their compassion, but all I felt was anger. Anger towards the people giving us food, because we did not need their charity. Anger towards myself, for not spending as much time with my little brother like I should've. Anger towards my mom, who pretended like we weren't hurting as a family. Most of all, I had absolute fury towards the so-called, all wonderful God, who had just given my brother brain cancer at eleven years old, and killed him at twelve.

My anger subsided after time, because I knew better than to blame others for things they didn't have control over. It just all felt unreal, and I remember every day feeling like I was just going through the motions. There wasn't one moment in that month that I could be awake for fifteen minutes without yearning to hear Dylan's voice. He was one of the most annoying little kids I've ever met, but he was also the kindest, goofiest, and most courageous. This was all said at his memorial, and to hear the preacher describe the angel in the coffin brought everyone to tears.

To this day, I feel bad for my little sister, Edyn, the most, who didn't shed one tear at the service. The night before that was a different story though, and I knew that she was fighting the urge to break down. After the memorial, my family and I tried to get back to whatever normal we could come up with. Edyn continued to go to her theater groups at school, and was

doing really well considering the circumstances. I was and still am proud of her for everything that she has had to fight through, overcome, and move on from. She is younger than me, but ever since that devastation, I look up to her as a person.

As for me, I was doing as well as I could be doing, and I was proud of myself for not spending all of my days alone in bed. This self-contentment lasted as long as it could've, but after a while, life got dull again. I started to not recognize myself anymore, and it was harder than ever to not sweat the small things.

Everything became a big deal to me, even if I didn't show it. My feet always felt heavy, like I had fifty-pound weights wrapped around each leg, slowing me down from getting to where I needed to be. I felt like this for a while, but at a certain point, my mom forced me to go to therapy. She told me that she hated seeing me like that, and honestly, I did too.

The woman I saw was sweet; she had a warmhearted smile, and her voice was gentle, making it easy to open up to her. I will always remember her as the woman who pulled me out of my first depressive episode, and I will never forget the patience she showed me. She ended up recommending further help from a psychiatrist. This was a predicament for me, because there was no way I wanted to go to a doctor to help my mental health. My grandma has bipolar schizophrenia, so it wasn't like I was uneducated about how much medication can help people struggling. It was the stigma around it, and the fact that I didn't want to be labeled with any medical condition that could possibly lead people to think I was incapable. I was offended that she suggested going to see a psychiatrist, and I quit going to therapy for good.

Obviously, I got worse after that. I couldn't make sense of any of my feelings. Some days, I felt like I had the whole world in my hands, and that I was untouchable and invincible. Other days, I felt like the whole world was on top of me, suffocating me from inside out. I didn't want to feel this way, and to be quite frank, I hated myself for not being able to control my emotions. I made an effort every single day to be aware of how I was feeling, and create something positive out of it. As each day went by, it became harder for me to try and understand why I felt this way. I had pushed everyone away from me. I felt alone. My head felt like an abandoned library with nothing in it but dust and old books that didn't matter anymore, and finally, one day I had enough.

I had to swallow my pride, and a week after an incident occurred, I went to talk to a psychiatrist with nothing but honesty, and to my surprise, I was diagnosed with Bipolar. I hated hear ing that; I thought I was in for a rocky rollercoaster of different medications, but I was wrong. I only take two medications, and they work as well as anything would ever be able to.

This experience opened my eyes to an internal battle I had been fighting for years, and subduing my emotions would never be enough. I needed help, and I got it. My grandma always told me that the rain comes before the

derstorm to be able to radiate that beautiful rainbow.

In the beginning, I described myself as a cold, wounded soul, but reading through, I know that I'm so much more than that. Yes, I have negative qualities about myself, but everyone does. I have grown so much in the way I care about people, the empathy and compassion I try to show, and my faith that I will



Who Am I?

Poem by Jennifer Kenyon

if you are what you love, then i am the smell of damp fallen leaves in an autumn forest frogs singing at dusk when the tide is high stepping outside into a gray new england morning, mist tickling my cheeks

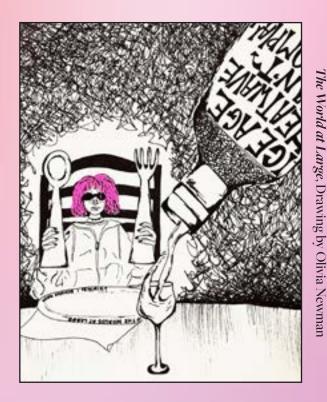
i am the feeling of my sons climbing into my bed after midnight and falling back asleep, huddled up and warm sharing cups of honey tea and talking about what we see when we dream

i am a mote of dust on your eyelash, catching the light the sound of your voice when you are smiling the dichotomy of torture and tenderness that you planted in my soul many years ago



Honeysuckle Lullaby
Painting by Danielle Mares

TCC: Trinity River Campus



r.o.t.!Poem by Milo Koenig

Must be so lovely to lie down in the Soft dark earth and think nothing of us To have no yesterday and no tomorrow Listening to a world I used to know

Forgiving life, forgiving time Forgiving God for all his crimes Finding a quiet in the pounding rain Finding a solace in my own grave

Must be lovely to sleep all day
Unbothered by angels saying, "Be not afraid."

They ask me, "Why don't you come on the days that we roam?
Why don't you want to visit your home?"

I don't belong there, no matter what they may think
I have loved the moon too long to crave the ray
Please do not mourn me and please do not cry
For I had a good life and went right on time

Death is the only end if it's about you
Instead, know the world will go outside your head
And on the paths once walked, others will tread
They will love the earth more than we ever did



Into the Galaxy
Painting by
Davi P. Custodio



Star Dancer Digital Art by Vanessa Espinosa

TCC: Trinity River Campus

America The Great

Poem by Kasey Mondragon

Our country is divided,

Skin to skin, color to color, tongue to tongue.

We are all the same.

Our arrogance, social values, and views,

Change a simple hello from person to person

To a gunshot wound.

We shed our grief on to the other like the passing of a torch,

Slowly spreading like a wildfire.

A wildfire inside of those mother's cries, as she longs for her child's voice of return.

Which is to say,

She shall never endure her child's kiss, laugh, smile, or voice once more.

Which is to say, they have taken a mother's heart,

Buried it under the ground that is now stepped on by pretentious lawmakers,

Who claim they gave their protection.

Lower the flags, they say

Give remembrance to all the tragedies this beautiful country has given us.

We pledge to a country who claims to have freedom?

Praise our moment of silence, only to hear echoes of gunshots and verbal discrimination.

Still, we must remain silent out of respect for speaking our minds.

It will only cause sound

So let's add sound to the cries of equality!

Let's add sound to the barriers of injustice!

Let's add sound to a country full of opinionated silence!

Let's add sound loud enough to stay grounded!

After all, this country is the "Land of the brave, home of the free."



The skies lit up like candles on a cake, and sparks and blasts could be heard from afar. Instead of celebratory sounds, we heard people screaming in fear. "Everyone get to the bomb shelter," my mom shouted in a shaky, frantic voice. A birthday party soon blew out into war.

Lebanon is a country in the Middle East with neighboring countries like Palestine (now occupied by Israel) and to the north, Syria. Lebanon is not your typical Middle Eastern country, an infinite land filled with sand, as portrayed by westerners. Picture a landscape of vast mountaintops and deep valley ways, with greenery surrounding your every step. This was the picture-perfect scene of our 2006 summer vacation where we were visiting my grand-parents in Arabsalim, southern Lebanon.

"Light up the candles then bring the cake to the living room," my grandmother told my older sister, Maryam. It was July 12, 2006: my mother's birthday. We gathered around to celebrate and as the night went on, we never knew it would take such a turn. Lebanon was in conflict with Israel over captured soldiers who were held hostage. The night came upon us, and that's when the skies lit up, the sounds of people crying in distress echoing in the streets.

Day 1, July 13

At this point, everyone was on edge. My mother was worried about us, but also worried about her parents. My grandparents were no strangers to the war scene, having lived through a civil war. My grandmother in all her glory was an anxious woman by nature. She would sit in her living room that consists of only glass windows and smoke her cigarettes gazing into her backyard that was full of freshly grown vegetables and colorful flowers.

It was a quiet afternoon, and no loud sounds of planes or missiles could be heard. Batool, my baby sister, was six at that time, and she asked if she could go down to the garden and play. As she stepped out and ran down the stairs to go into the garden to be a child for a minute, a loud thunderous bang shook the whole house. My grandmother jolted up and, for some reason, grabbed the ashtray and a remote control and bawled out: "Oh my god, Batool!" What we heard was the aftermath of a missile that hit the village close by. Batool was shocked mentally, but was physically unharmed.

Day 2, July 14

We all lay frozen in the bomb shelter. I was twelve

at that time, still young and unaware of the seriousness of the situation. I remember hearing the explosions at night, which drove me crazy. I had my mini pink iPod set to repeat the same album by Panic! At The Disco to filter out the sounds of the bombs and war planes. I kept wishing the missiles would somehow turn around and fall back on to the enemy.

My mother would stay up at night and pray while we pretended to sleep: "Allah (God), what should I do, please guide me," she whimpered as tears rolled down her bony cheeks. With all the bombing happening, phone lines would get cut off and the only time the phone rang was to inform us that someone had sadly passed away.

That night the phone rang at midnight. "Move ... move, goddammit ... why won't you move?!" I heard my mother cry as she struck her legs, but panic rendered her motionless.

Day 3, July 15

Living in villages has its perks; everyone is basically family. Our neighbors got together and decided to have Turkish coffee on our balcony floor. The smell of the freshly brewed coffee put a smile on their faces as though nothing was happening. We set the tray down to pour everyone a cup.

"Be careful," my grandmother said, as she tapped my hand to direct me not to fill the cups to the brim. The sky was blue and the sun was shining bright. The cool, crisp summer breeze brushed against our faces. But the happiness did not last long, as a rocket could soon be seen from where we sat.

The cups shook from the sound of three enemy war planes that flew over us. Fear soon took over and sent everyone into a panicked frenzy.

"Rana, Maryam, Batool! Run! Run back to the shelter! Go now!" my mother shrieked out. The day carried on to be nothing but yet another horrible nightmare.

Day 4, July 16

The conflict was getting harsher, and Maryam started getting sick. She lost her appetite and stopped talking. She lost the color in her rosy cheeks and would just spend her days in bed. With each passing day, as the blasts and enemy planes kept getting louder and closer, her body grew weaker.



Feather In The Air
Photograph
by Taylor Pels-Hernandez

This night changed the rest of our lives. At three in the morning we woke up from the sound of a loud blast that seemed like a missile just landed in our backyard. The house three blocks down from where we were got blown up. We all jumped and huddled around my mother, all of us shivering in tears, wondering if this was the last time we would ever hug her, if this was the last time we would see each other.

We all turned and involuntarily faced the Kaaba, where we turn to pray. We said what seemed like our last prayer in unison with trembling voices: "I bear witness that there is no God but Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah." My mother looked at us with sorrow in her eyes and made the decision to find a way to get us out.

Day 5, July 17

My mother asked around if there was a way out of the village and into the capital city, Beirut. However, the international airport and all the main bridges and highways in and out were targeted first in the attack and were reduced to ruins. The only way out of the country was through Syria, who opened their borders to the Lebanese people and accepted all the refugees.

Day 6, July 18

A brave man came toward us and asked if we needed a ride out. He worked as a taxi driver, risking his life to help families escape. My mother did not hesitate to accept his offer. He drove a broken-down Mercedes-Benz that

would not fit more than four people.

"Mama, I will not get in this nasty car," I said in a self-indulgent manner. She slapped me, her hands trembling, and I got the message that this was not a joke. I was upset and in tears because the day we departed on our journey, not knowing if we would make it out alive, was my thirteenth birthday.

Day 7, July 19

Usually the drive up to the city would take an hour, but ours took four hours. The graphic scenes of burning buildings and houses with fumes looming in the air suffocating Mother Nature herself was both terrifying and devastating. The car ride was not the most pleasant journey because we were all tightly pressed together like pages in a closed book. That morning before we departed, my father — who was not with us at the time — called us every hour to check if we were all right. All while we were driving, I kept thinking: "Oh my god, my own dad forgot my birthday. He spoke to us several times and has not even wished me a happy birthday."

When we finally arrived at a safe house in Beirut, my father called and asked my mother if he could talk to me. I was still so upset until I heard his voice quivering through the phone: "My beautiful daughter, I did not forget your special day, but I was just waiting for you to make it to a safe place to wish you a happy birthday. I love you."

Only then had I grasped that happy birthday would have been his last words to me.



Therapy Sessions and My Head Poem by Kasey Mondragon

Roaming through the aisles,

Passing by books with no titles

All these books belong to her.

Each one represents fractions of her passions,

fears, the causes of her tears, memories and stories.

She turns each page, looking for the right words to say

So she looks a little closer

Only to holster a pen, to write the words that may never be heard.

Nonetheless

It's all a mess.

Her audience is now in distress, awaiting for her reaction to all the side traction.

The luxury in her day-to-day stress, often brings baggage to the chest.

Pounding every second of every day.

Slowly she opens her mouth, yet no words come out.

It's time to reconcile everything that isn't real

Man in the chair, show me your care

Ideas and talk, only to walk.

My dear, be sincere, understanding your fears often brings you to tears.

It won't make you less of a person

To approach the coercion, that wraps around your mind and emotions.

It makes you human to be able to pass the illusion you place in your reality.

As it becomes your normality.

This life is ours, take in all the hours.

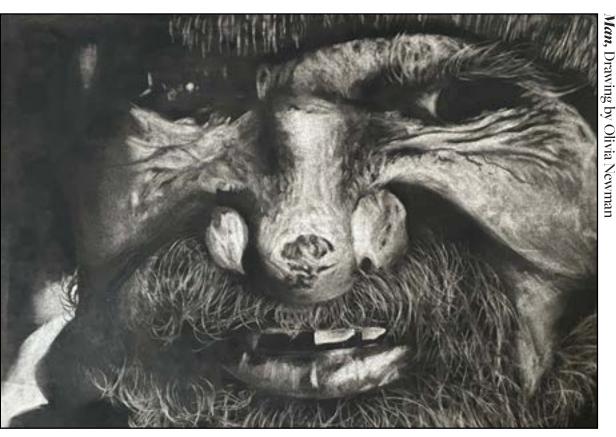
Day by day it will soon go away.

She visits her aisles full of desires.

For she has more books to write, with all the daylight in sight.

New words are now written to say, things may happen but it will be

Okay.



July 10th

Poem by Eliezar DeLeon

I remember that night.

The night I fell to my knees for you.

A comfortable position for me,

Yet the way I felt was anything but.

On my knees, pleading for love,

Pleading for you.

You stared down at me, and I stared up,

Just like we had so many times before.

Except this time, with tears running down my face,

I wasn't begging for you, I was begging you.

To see me. To love me. To want me.

But you turned away.

It was there in that slight moment that I ascertained,

I would never be enough for you.

I removed my tears as I got up off the ground,

Along with the doubt sitting deep within.

I finally understood.

I would never be enough for you,

Despite the fact that I am more than enough.

Just because you failed to see my worth does not mean I

was not worthy of you,

It just means my love was not meant for you.

— It was all for you.



Thoughts, Collage by Rana Sobhi Amin



Side B

Nonfiction by Casey Allen

o my city: I've moved around my entire life. At first it was because I was a child and was told that I was moving instead of being asked, but nothing changed as I became an adult. I feel the safest when I'm on the move. I think it's because I'm scared to stick around somewhere for long enough to see everything I've built there catch fire and burn down. This has been a trend that also didn't change when I became an adult. I've never had a steady place to call home, which makes home more of a feeling to me instead of a place.

Fort Worth is a different story, though. I was born here, and no matter how far away I go, I always find my way back. It's the place I found myself again when my life became unmanageable in my early twenties. It embraced me and all of my flaws from the second I took the exit four and a half years ago. Fort Worth saved me; it shaped me, it raised me, it challenged me just enough to make me work toward being the person I hoped to become. And I am that person now. For the first time in my life, I felt like I had all the tools I needed to achieve my goals. But now I need new tools, I have new goals. I love seeing familiar faces, especially the ones that light up when they see mine. However, I hate that I feel the loneliest in rooms that are overflowing with people. There's a void in me that I can't quite figure out, but something's telling me that I'm not going to fill it here.

To my family: I'll start with you, Pops. You've never had perfect circumstances but you've always been the perfect Dad to me. You taught me to love hard. I've never questioned that I'm the most important thing in the world to you, it's very apparent to everyone that meets you. You're the very best friend I've ever had. You're my rock, and on the days that I couldn't do it for me, I did it for you.

To Justin, I love you so much. You're the only

person in the world that can make life comprehensible to me at times. You know who I am, you know where I've been, and you love me for it. I've always looked up to you because you're my dickhead older brother, but I don't think I've ever admired you as much as I do in this moment. You're a great Dad, just like yours.

Which brings me to the kids, Asher and Saucy. I pray to whoever will listen, that you're raised in a manner that maintains your innocence for as long as possible. I hope that when you're old and you hear stories about when you were younger, they are nothing but the sweetest memories. Hove you both so much, and being your Uncle Cowbone is my very favorite thing.

Jennifer, you're the only one in our family that's not fucking CRAZY. I have so much respect for you across the board, especially in regards to the mother you are to Sammi. Just like my Dad, you've always made something out of nothing. You're a goddamn rock star, and I love you to pieces.

To the man, the myth, the legend—my grandfather. I have adored you from the very first time you ever held me. You're everyone's favorite person, and the life of every party. I hope I've made you proud, because that has always been my most important goal. I love you buddy, and yes, these pants had holes in them when I bought them.

Lastly, my Mom. Mom, if you get a hold of this letter somehow, I love you. I don't care about any of the other shit.

To my friends, I'll address you fuckers as a unit or I'll be here all day. I love you all so much, you are the family I've gotten to choose. You are the people that know me the most, as you see me on a daily basis. Thank you for all the times you put a smile on my face or made me laugh, and for not letting me be alone on the days I



Mulligan, Glass Mosaic by Taylor Pels-Hernandez

didn't want to be. I've always gotten by with a little help from my friends.

I know I just said I was speaking to the masses, but I do want to make a quick shout out to baby Jake real quick. On Christmas Eve night, we walked over to Lola's Trailer Park after work to meet Leon Bridges. We threw a couple beers back, and started hashing some shit out between us, as brothers do. At the end of one of our rants, you asked a weird question. You said, "Everybody knows you're not normal. In every room that you walk in, every person in the room knows that you are not normal. Everybody knows that you're smart. Everybody knows that you care. Everybody knows that you have crazy life experiences. Everybody that knows you knows that you have a gift. What the fuck are you gonna do with it?"

Thank you for that, buddy. You've always have

juuuuuust enough in ya (never too little) to tell me the exact thing I need to hear, at the exact time that I need to hear it. I love you so much, you are precious to me. The cool thing about what you said that night, is that you have it too, pal. I don't know what it means yet, but I think it's something that we have to figure out for ourselves. But you got it too, dude. What the fuck are you gonna do with it?

To my love, the person who carries my heart. I know you didn't ask for this position, but tough shit. Time has never been on our side, from the moment we met—but I have never loved a single thing in the world the way that I love you. From the moment that my eyes met yours, I knew I wanted to love you for the rest of my life. It's not always easy and it doesn't always make sense, but it's the purest feeling that I've ever felt in my life. I'm not saying that I love you more than everyone else I've ever met—hi people from up top—but I have

never loved anything in my entire life the WAY that I've loved you. Everything that I've ever said to you has been true. I would never do anything to hurt you or disrespect you. The only thing I've ever lied to you about, was saying that I was okay in a time that I wasn't. I was scared to push you away.

I'm so happy to have met you when I did. I'm proud of the person I've been able to be for you, and

I'm so proud of you in everything that you do. I admire you in every way that you can imagine. Remember earlier when I said that home was more so of a feeling to me? You are that feeling to me. Laying in bed watching our "progrums" while I give vou scratches, with the dogs under the covers or when you're driving with the windows down and singing your ass off, and you reach for my hand. I never know if

you're wanting to hold it, or if you just want to rip the vape that it's holding. That's home to me, and it's my favorite one I've ever had.

It has always been you, from the second I met you. I love just being with you, and I love just being with you. You are so perfectly imperfect to me, I love every single thing about you. From the tallest hair on your little head, to the end of your fuckin' toenails. My heart and my head grew so tired trying to figure out if you're

my lover or my friend. But I've enjoyed every second of getting to wear both hats, and you will always be one of my favorite friends. That's a pretty kick-ass problem to have. I hope one day that the stars align in a manner that we get a fair chance at love together someday, or I find the alternate universe where we're together. That's where I want to be. Until then, it's my honor to be your pal. Every time I see something beautiful, I'll think of you. You are home to me, and when I'm not with you, I'm

homesick. I will always send you love letters, and whenever I die, I'll write you from the grave. Always, Dudey.

All I've ever wanted was to love and to be loved, and I have. I feel as if I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be in my life. I'm so grateful for the people and places that make up my life, but in order to love people the way I want, I'm going to have to learn to love myself first. For the first

time ever, I have to put myself first. I need to romanticize myself for a bit. How the fuck am I supposed to help anybody, if I don't help myself first? I'm not sure where I'm going, but I'm gonna go now. I know that it won't be broken, and it won't be boring. I hope I come back as a better son, brother, uncle, nephew, cousin, friend, and lover. I hope that when I come back, I can help other people who are hurting. Everybody deserves to be loved, no reason necessary. Let's start with me.

"From the moment that my eyes met yours, I knew I wanted to love you for the rest of my life. It's not always easy and it doesn't always make sense, but it's the purest feeling that I've ever felt in my life."



Goblin Valley, Photograph by Grant Helenbrook





Miami Beach, Photograph by Hector Raul

War on Waves

Nonfiction by Anisa Gonzalez

Water raced up my nose, burning and ripping the oxygen from my lungs. The salt seared my retinas. My hands clawed desperately through the onslaught of waves, scrambling to reach the top. My arms and legs felt heavy and tired. My muscles wailed in anguish, being reduced to ash under the fire raging in them. As I drifted further and further into the depths, I thought to myself: I'm going to die.

Summer that year had been an unforgivable heat. It raged mercilessly, the fever coursing through my veins and seeping into my pores. The ocean's waves crashed on the shore like cymbals breaking against each other. Blinding white light glistened over the crystal waters, dancing freely over the trepid surface. My lips and tongue grew tart and shriveled as salt accumulated on them. Just warm enough to be bearable, each swell of the sea swallowed my legs, vanishing underneath the surface. To those unfamiliar with her touch, it could feel suffocating and frightful; her vastness is uncharitable to those unprepared for the beauty and the temper she holds. To me, however, it was my freedom; it was my strength. In the morning tide, I was invincible. But I didn't always feel that way. There was a time in my life where the ocean, her vastness, represented nothing but anger and failure.

town. I knew nobody and I spent my days wandering the shoreline with my thoughts and fears to keep my company. They stood by me as I trekked through the sand, loose granules finding their way between my toes and setting an established home there.

One day, another ridiculously hot day, I met a group of people who welcomed me into their fold with kindness and acceptance. Yet I didn't feel like I truly fit in. Kind, they were. Welcoming and warm and funny, and always managed to make me laugh. They'd brought happiness to me, and I didn't feel so alone. But I felt like a piece of my membership into their collective was missing.

Being part of a team had always been second nature to me; I was a national swimmer and being a part of a group was what I'd known my whole life. And my exclusivity into that group came from my skills. What I could do to fit in. It came easily to me, like a fish to water, they said. Being in the water didn't feel like second nature. It felt like my first. So, when they'd asked me to join them on the battlefront and join the surfing team, I'd gladly accepted.

The ocean's currents were a massive beast to overcome. They thrashed and wailed violently, curling over themselves as the sea's fury raged. She's unpredictable, nothing like the still, foreseeable calmness of the pool lanes. Thirteen was a delicate age for me. I was new in Carefully laid in equal segments, they aligned perfectly.

The water wasn't of optimal temperature, wasn't routinely chlorinated and scrubbed clean. It was a mountain that I wasn't equipped to climb.

"Cough it up, let it out!! You're going to be okay. Breathe, it's okay," my friend Addison – we called her Addie–yelled.

My ears were ringing, my eyes unable to focus but I could faintly make out the silhouette of two – no, three – people above me. My lungs screamed in relief when fresh oxygen entered my bloodstream. A wave of nausea hit, and I curled over, face buried in the sand as the water burned its way up my throat.

"Why don't you just stay here, okay? We're almost done out there."

Then a sickening shiver curled in my stomach

and the waves paled in comparison. A heavy, sinking feeling weighed in my chest as tears sprung sharply in my eyes. The sunlight was a cool relief to the heat boiling over in my cheeks while a repetitive stabbing assaulted my heart; I was a failure. Why wasn't I good enough? What was so wrong with me that I couldn't manage a simple task like standing up? I

How ridiculous.
What was the point?
Why bother?

watched as my friends cheered and celebrated the success of the others, who unlike me, had stood proudly on their board.

It had felt like the months they'd selflessly dedicated to training me was a waste. I sat there in the sand; my arms swaddled my legs tightly. I probably looked pathetic, sitting alone with my face in my knees. How ridiculous. What was the point? Why bother? I thought to myself then, I should just give up. Two months have gone by, and I have nothing to show for it. It would be so much easier to go back to what I know. My membership in this group was unattainable and I'd have to sink in that realization.

These thoughts wrecked into my brain over and over, so much so that I hadn't noticed the figure taking place beside me. I looked over and saw Addie's dad. His name was David. He was older than the other dads. The thick, black curls were freshly dampened, and droplets of water cascaded down his trimmed beard. He was tall, but slim in build. Bright, light baby blues looked at me with sympathy glistening in them, shining against his tan skin.

"How're you doing, reef bait?" he asked. I scoffed at him and looked away. He inhaled next to me deeply and exhaled just as intensely. "Sorry, too soon," he apologized. I sniffled and asked him what he wanted. He didn't say anything for a long time. Just sat next to me and watched the gentle tug of waves at the shoreline. At some point, I watched them too. It led me to where everyone else was riding against the current so freely.

"Well," David started, "no sense in sitting here crying about it. If you want to do it, you'll get out there and do it. Doesn't matter how many times you fail; you just do it."

I looked at him incredulously, lip curled in a snarl. He smiled at me, patted my shoulder in encouragement, and pulled himself up from the sand. He didn't really say anything else, simply looked out at the water and glanced back at me.

I realized now this was a challenge. I'd been dared

to stand up again. But how could I? What was going to be different this time? I looked out at where my friends congregated in the swell, where they splashed so gleefully. And where had I been? Wallowing in the sand. This wasn't about wasting two months without success; this was about using that time to achieve success. I didn't want to lose them. But

more importantly, I didn't want to lose to myself.

I took a deep breath. I yanked the limp ponytail through my long, wavy brown hair and curled it tightly on top of my head. With my board clutched firmly in my hand, I'd made my way back in. Each step in I felt the sand get further and further away from my grip.

Each paddle, each flutter of feet, they were determined to make it to the line. Five hundred yards, then four hundred, then three. Then I was there. My friends looked at me with concern when I sat upright. I merely smiled at them and nodded a short reassurance. I would be okay. I would do this.

Each push through the waves was brutal. The ocean relentlessly beat against the smooth grain of my dark green board. Each break was a slap in the face, the salinity stinging in my eyes. The desire to succeed, to make it, to not fall behind and drown in loneliness again motivated me. I pushed on. I needed to do this.

The sun blazed overhead, intensely hot. Most of the line had migrated towards the shore, ready to pack it in for the day. But I couldn't leave just yet. I had a mission to fulfill, and I couldn't accept failure. My friends were ready to leave. They called to me saying they were heading back to the shoreline as well. I stayed behind. I was alone. My legs dangling freely in the clear waters, I sat amongst the gentle push and pull of the ocean by myself. This loneliness, however, I didn't fear. I took a breath, deep and steady. I calmed the anxious jittering vibrating in my skull. This was what I had been working for, this moment in front of me.

I whipped around and threw myself flat on the board. My arms and legs motored powerfully leaving a trail of foamy, white bubbles in their wake. My muscles screamed with exhaustion and pleaded I stopped the gross overuse. But I couldn't stop. I had to outrun the vicious, coiling wave plundering right for me. I had to move it; go faster, pull harder, kick stronger. Timing in the water was the most crucial. A second too early or too late made all the difference. The difference between failure and success was held in the hand of time and my ability to take hold of it.

My time had been approaching. The unsureness of success and fear of failure ticked in my brain with every labored breath as each moment went by. It was right behind me. The shadow of insecurity and the cold, tantalizing touch of my inability to triumph. I pushed forward, toward the warm light of certainty and the benevolent embrace of victory. Each paddle, each kick, propelled me further into that dream.

My time had arrived. I hauled myself upright, the curl of the wave reaching its peak. I cemented my feet at the focal point of my board. My trembling arms found their last push as they shoved my back straight to attention. Water sprayed my face when the tip of my board sliced through the waves. My feet wavered, unsure of their stance. My arms dipped, tired and unable to hold their own weight. I closed my eyes and braced my lungs for the vicious intake of salty seawater I felt was coming.

But it never came. All I could smell was the fresh air. I could feel the wind coasting over my dampened cheeks and rustling my drenched locks. I heard the roaring waves behind me. No. Not behind me. Beneath me. The water was beneath me. And that howling wind couldn't drown out the overjoyed cheers of my friends on the shore. I shuddered under the realization. I did it. I was standing. My board and I were driving through the tide. I had done it. Exhilaration flooded my body, and it was the most intoxicating sensation.

I rode that elation until my feet hit the sand. I was immediately encased in arms. Addie squealed and cried out congratulations and awestruck praise. I was overwhelmed by the feeling of completion. I received tender pats on the back, chattering of celebratory dinner, and thrilling promises to come back at first light and surf again. The acceptance, the sensation of belonging, I felt it in my bones.

And amongst the tears and cries of victory, I heard a slow, meaningful applause tickle my eardrum. I instinctively

followed the sound where I saw David standing just off to the side, a proud fatherly smile on his face. Something in that smile bubbled accomplishment in me. It felt rewarding to know I hadn't given up.

"Dad!" Addison called out. "Did you see that!? She did it!!"

David smiled back towards us and nodded.

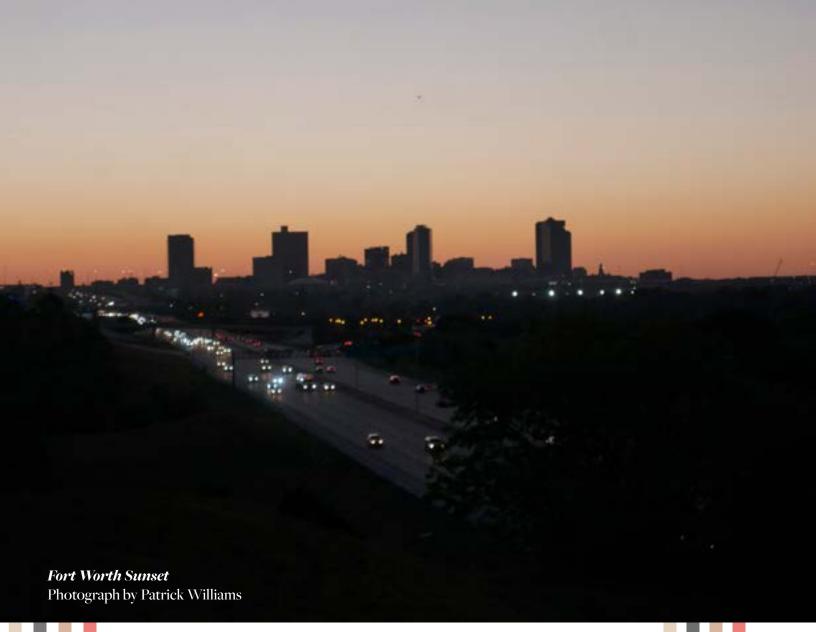
"I did. I'm incredibly proud of you," he smiled. "Now do it again."

And I did. Through that journey of doing it again, I faced adversity over and over. Of course, it didn't make me a pro. I wasn't miraculously more skilled than before. I struggled over my time in the water. I fell face-first into the tormenting waves time and time again. And each time I fell, I reminded myself I needed to get back up. Because failure wasn't an outcome; it was a mindset. For as long as I believed I couldn't make it, I never would. And eventually, after pushing myself to change that mindset, I noticed that the times I stood strong and secure far outnumbered the times where my strength seemingly wasn't enough. That I had truly understood my failures were not the result of my inability to perform, but rather my inability to persevere.

The ocean is unpredictable. She's a violent myriad of emotions. To those seeking entrance into her vastness, I'll say this: Don't give up on it. Don't give up on yourself. It's a war within the waves, a battle through the tide, and a victory is guaranteed only to those brave enough to challenge themselves beyond limitations. Because the sea makes exceptions for no one. And here in the morning tide, I'd never felt stronger.



Summer Seahorses, Sculpture by Sebastian Navarro



Weathering the storm

Poem by Eliezar DeLeon

I was caught in a storm.

Your words and lies

raining down on me.

I stayed quiet. Secluded.

Hoping that soon, the storm would weather.

Finally when the downpour cleared,

and the rays of yellow radiated down at us,

I saw myself.

There, gleaming in the puddles of the aftermath,

Was a reflection of me, chasing someone,

Who was running in the opposite direction.

Roots & Reflections



Butterfly Hair CombSculpture by Danielle Mares



Three Little Birds

Poem by Mary K. Maturo

we dreamt animated dreams.

the vhs rewinding as we fell asleep
falling downstairs
falling up hills
three trust falls and two lactose pills
stop this roller coaster and don't look back
like the glitter spilt in my backpack
while you were stringing safety pins on your sleeves
planet earth was supposed to turn slowly
you were the endless sky
and you were the color infused
and I was the stars in our eyes
that made us curse our youth

From the Book I'll Never Write

Poem by Arya Ruiz

A page from the book I'll never write: For when you miss him.

When you miss him, & want to call, want to feel his arms again, hear his voice, maybe just be in his presence. For when he tries to return & Cloud 9 seems attainable this time around, when you find your heart fighting once more with your mind trying to convince you maybe now he'll love you as much as you love him, maybe this time he'll keep his word.

For when you want to give him another chance:

Remember all the times you cried out his name, the times you cursed the world for bringing the two of you together. Remember all the words he said to you, the ones that cut deeper & deeper every time he spoke them. Remember how he called you "pathetic" & "psycho" when you asked for reassurance. Remember when he "killed" you from his life because you wanted to end things. The sentence "You're dead to me" still weakens your knees.

Remember all the times he would raise you up to the clouds only to throw you down. Remember all the pain, all the hurt, all the ways he blamed you for the inevitable downfall. The times the finger was pointed at you once again & when you laid awake at night circling through the problems trying to find a solution, trying to fix something you didn't break.

Remember the countless excuses you made, the baggage you took on to free his strength, and how many times you repeated "As long as he's ok, I'm ok," allowing yourself to become second.

Remember the night the hurt became too overpowering you found yourself laying on your bedroom floor, fully convinced every bone was broken, the strength was gone, you were a shell of your former self. That's the pain that left a mark on you, that continues to haunt you on random nights, the pain that's still buried deep inside, remember that.

Remember all he put you through, & remember you are worth so much more than a child dressed as a man.



Whale, Sculpture by Sebastian Navarro

Heaven or Hell?

Poem by Milo Koenig

darkness comes to claim a soul he's not ready to leave he did not have a perfect life but he always stayed on his feet

an angel wishes to take him away to be perfect and free but this soul will struggle and bargain he bites, he kicks, and he scream

> humans with tears in their eyes wet their cold and rosy cheeks voices hang around them all framing their beautiful fragility

they lift their song to the sky praising the humble and meek someday they'll walk the golden hall their prayers are what they seek





Goodbye from the Editors - Roots & Reflections 2022



Editors

Edwin Barrera
Davi P. Custodio
Vanessa Espinosa
Andrew Liang
Jeanne Lindsay
Milo Koenig*
Taylor Pels-Hernandez
Anneliese Raya
Angelina Villatoro

Editors Thoughts:

"10/10 would recommend" - Vanessa Espinosa "A crazy fun ride and enjoyed every moment of it" - Davi P. Custodio

"Through thick and thin, we still have fun" - Edwin Barrera

The editors of Roots and Reflections also decided, in lieu of providing traditional biographies, to share the music they listened toduring the production of this issue. These are the songs that spoke to them during late nights and encouraged them during their three-hour-long class sessions. Enjoy!

Editors' Playlist



	TITLE	ADDED BY	TIME
	Braces Friend	Milo Koenig	1:42
×.	El Muchacho de los Ojos Tristes Jeanette	Anneliese Raya	3:27
₩	Bugbear Chloe Moriondo	Vanessa Espinosa	2:54
W	STAY (with Justin Bieber) The Kid LAROI, Justin Bieber	Edwin Barrera	2:22
ě	simple times Kacey Musgraves	Davi P. Custodio	2:47
	Dream On Nazareth	Jeanne Lindsay	3:27
	Promise Akira Yamaoka	Angelina Villatoro	4:40
	Love Shack The B-52's	Taylor Pels-Hernandez	5:21
	Not Giving You Up Big Time Rush	Andrew Liang	3:01









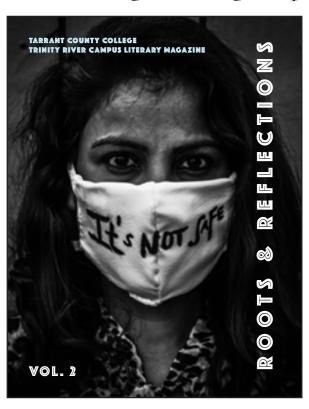
Everyone has a story. It's time to submit yours.

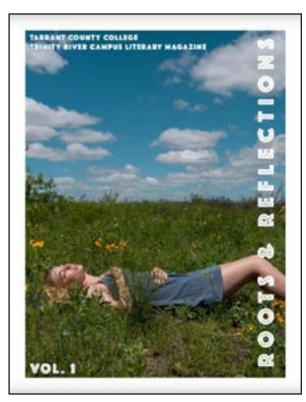
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SEEKING PREVIOUSLY UNPUBLISHED:

fiction • poetry • nonfiction • scripts • photographs drawings • collages • paintings • other works of art





Want to get a jump on getting into the 2023 edition? Scan the QR code here to review the rules, and to submit your work!



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