

The background of the cover is an abstract composition. The top portion features a soft, textured pink gradient. Below this, a dense layer of black ink splatters and drips covers the surface, creating a complex, organic pattern. Interspersed within these black marks are patches of vibrant orange and red, suggesting a forest floor or autumn foliage. The overall effect is one of layered, naturalistic textures.

Aries

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The mission of *Aries* is to promote the arts, establish a greater appreciation for the humanities, and demonstrate admiration of traditional styles and new innovations.

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LETTER FROM THE EDITORS

To our readers and writers,

We would like to thank everyone for their submissions and allowing us to bring you this edition of the *Aries* literary journal. We also want to thank everyone for their patience, as this edition truly symbolizes the end of an era while we transitioned from two publications a year to a single, larger journal.

To that end, we welcomed submissions focused on the end of something, be that a time-period, self, a relationship, or an environment. We also welcomed new beginnings, to celebrate what followed these ends.

It has been an honor working with the work provided by Texas Wesleyan's students, staff, faculty, and alumni. We thank you for the opportunity, and hope that *Aries'* new beginning is just as bright as the era that just ended.

Sincerely,

Cameron Rogers and Alexa Colvin

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THE LAST QUILT

TAMMY TITLOW

SECOND PLACE POETRY

A tiny stitch of fabric; she measured and cut and sewed.
Piece by piece and stitch by stitch a square soon evolved.
Each square was carefully planned and laid.
Until a beautiful quilt appeared.

Made with love, her weary hands continued to measure, cut and
sew.
She gifted her family with the masterpiece of fabric.
The quilts have wrapped the newborn, covered the sick and warmed
the cold.
They have seen laughter and tears, joy and sorrow.

Over the years she continued to measure, cut and sew.
Bent over the sewing machine and leaning over the iron, she poured
her heart into each seam.
Until one day the machine stood still.
Pieces of fabric longing for a design lay neatly around the room.

She never finished her last quilt.
The finished quilts are now her legacy and our memories.
We can no longer hug her, but the quilt will be our hug each time we
remember her.
It will remind us of how much love she had for us and how much she
will be missed.

Every time the family comes together;
we complete her last quilt.

THIS I BELIEVE

YAKELINA VARGAS-MENDEZ

"We came to the U.S. because there were people who wanted to hurt us."

I believe my family should be treated fairly. I believe they shouldn't be treated as stray dogs locked in a shelter. They are people. They're my people. They're not evil; they mean no harm. My loved ones are running from the dangers in our precious country; we cannot stay safe in our own homes. They run from evil, but they don't carry evil with them when they cross the border, they only carry a gallon of water, and la imagen de nuestra madre querida.

I believe my people deserve a bed to sleep in. Our children, nuestros bebés, are sleeping on cold concrete without a blanket to cover themselves, without the warmth of their mothers. Cold surrounds our children in those detentions: cold floors, cold nights, cold food, and cold hearts. Sleep deprivation is a big thing in ICE Detention Centers because they have no bed, they have no warmth, and the lights are never turned off. Serial killers have beds in prison. Child predators have the blessing of having the lights turned off at night.

I believe Detention Centers should be terminated. How can a cruel place like this still be standing? I thought we were all in the same page on how concentration camps were unacceptable and awful. Hypocritical of Americans to claim they saved Jews from the devilish hands of Hitler when they're following his horrifying steps. America wants to go save countries, but they're murdering mi gente en jaulas. Ernesto Rocha-Cuadra, mi tío, died from a cardiac arrest at an ICE Detention Center. Officials claim he was given a medical drug "to reverse the effects of opioids." Tío's initial drug tests were negative. He was not given any medication.

"I had no idea where my son was. They all deceived me. They were supposed to give me my son back at the airport and it was a lie."

I believe parents shouldn't be brutally separated from their babies. A mother needs her children, and a child needs their mother. It's terrifying to a mother to be separated from their child for a couple of hours, now imagine the pain they have to endure when

they haven't been able to see their children for three years. Can you hear my child screaming, "Quiero a mi mama?" Can you hear my mother sobbing, "Quiero a mi bebé?"

I speak. I write para mi gente. My family can't scream nor whisper for justice because they are being oppressed by Americans since they "pose a unique risk today because of terrorism." Mis padres, mis hermanos, mis primos, mis tíos, mis abuelos, y mis amigos are humans, humans who seek safety, like any American would, if they were in danger at their own country. I write porque ellos merecen justicia. My voice might be dismissed by many because I will be another immigrant daughter who doesn't know how to pronounce certain words, but I'm certain my writing will disturb those who are hurting mi familia. I'll take the chance to move someone's heart and start a fight for change.

DECEIVING PROMISES

CARMEN FLORES

Promises...oh promises you made me.
I believed them each one that came from your mouth,
I saw them,
I heard them,
Even smelled them.

Promises are meant to deceive.
Meant for me to believe...
Until it's time for me to leave

I wish you had promised me to stay.
Mean all the things you said.
Instead, here I lay.
Wishing for the words you would never say.

THE SEVEN STEPS TO CURING A BROKEN HEART

SAFFRON MAASZ

THIRD PLACE FICTION

STEP ONE: Trash everything. And I mean EVERYTHING. Throw away the pictures, the photos, the weird keychains he would get every time he went to the run-down gas station around the corner. They were tacky anyway. Trash the oversize sweatshirts that “smell like him.” You know and I know they smell like cigarettes and musk and not the “liquid sunshine” you describe in your poems.

STEP TWO: Replace your sheets. They will always remind you of Him. The bed will always seem to echo loneliness and the sheets will be tainted with the smell of Him. You will subconsciously reach across the bed and wake up with empty hands and a heavy heart. The scent of vanilla body lotion you would wear just for Him will never come off the sheets and you will find that the overly sweet smell will seem to suffocate you in your sleep, so the best course of action is to buy new sheets.

STEP THREE: Buy and devour the contents of a whole tub of mint chocolate ice cream. The mint will cool down your achy heart and the chocolate will distract you from the bitterness of the breakup.

STEP FOUR: Don’t listen to slow or sad music. Every lyric and verse will just be an homage to Him. The sad songs will just make you sadder. The best way to drown out heartache is through loud and pounding music that makes it impossible to think. The earache that may come afterward doesn’t compare to the heartache that currently makes your bones feel heavy.

STEP FIVE: Do NOT cut, bleach, or dye your hair. Bleaching your hair will only accomplish making your hair look as dead as you feel inside. Choppy bangs will not make you feel like a new person nor cure the heartbreak. There will be times you miss the younger version of yourself, best not to leave her unrecognizable.

STEP SIX: Don't be afraid to sleep in your mother's bed again. You will find that her gentle hands have a surprisingly calming effect on your broken heart. A part of you will feel childish, but you soon will recognize that you will never be too old for your mother's comfort.

STEP SEVEN: Breathe. Eventually, the ugly crying will cease and your bedsheets will smell like you again. You will get a different perfume that He won't be able to recognize. The aching in your chest and the heaviness in your bones will eventually lighten and breathing will become easier. Until then, don't cut and bleach your hair, and treat yourself to some mint chocolate ice cream.

JUST KNOW

CHASE DI IULIO

I don't know what you've heard
Just know that it didn't hurt.
And I'm not only talking physically
But mentally too.
I was happy to go
A weird thought, I know,
But I was.

Just know that it wasn't unfair
It wasn't unjust or cheap.
I was finally outmatched
And I couldn't be happier.
The suffering and stress have finally been released.

Just know that I didn't die heroically.
I collapsed to the sea,
In a burning mess of metal and flames,
Unable to leave the cockpit.

Just know that the flames
Didn't melt my flesh
As the water pooled up my chest,
Then embraced my lungs.

Just know that my last words
Weren't about you or me
But rather,
"What a cozy place, the endless blue sea."

Just know that my body is still there,
Sitting in the cockpit of the plane,
Amidst the reef and the rocks.
Waiting for eternity to come.

Just know that I wish things could be different.
Just know that I wish you could hear me say all this now.
Just know that I wish I could come home.
Just know that well...just know.

FAREWELL LETTER

YAKELINA VARGAS-MENDEZ

Mr. I-like-you-but-I-can't-date-you-because-you-are-una-niña-de-familia,

I've always been around what true love looks like. My parents' love never seems to fade, even after 20 years when they first met.

My dad has set a high standard on what a man can be when he loves someone. Even after all these years, he remembers what my mom was wearing when he first saw her at the train station, a white t-shirt with blue light jeans. My mom does not remember what he was wearing, but she knows one thing: no one has made her heart race like he did. She claims he is the most handsome man she has ever seen.

He's her papucho.

My dad has never been the guy to open the car door for my mother, but instead, he is the man who cuts a flower every single time he passes one and gives it to my mom. He is the man who sends multiple texts every day to remind her how much he loves her. He is the man who holds my mother every time we are in public and at home. He is the man who does not miss a day to tell my mom, "Te ves hermosa mi amor."

That type of love is what I know. The type of love I *deserve*.

When I first met you, I didn't notice the clothes you were wearing. I didn't notice if my heart was beating irregularly. I don't even remember when we started noticing each other. But I know one thing: I've been holding these feelings for so long.

We started sneaking glances every time we would see each other at events. Eye contact lasted a little too long to mean nothing. I've never had such intense eye contact with someone. We would be listening to someone in our group, and when I wanted to sneak a glance at you, you were already looking at me. All those glances, were they intentional?

Your *meaningless* accidental touches gave me sparks every time.

I remember the day you made me feel special. I thought *this is it. This is the moment where he's going to confess. We're made for each other.* But that moment never happened. Maybe I was experiencing

seasickness, and I interpreted everything wrong, because the next day, I found out about you and Ms. Sucks-for-you-he's-my-boyfriend-now. The women who I couldn't stand ni en pintura.

At first, I couldn't believe it, or I didn't want to believe it. The women you endlessly claimed "Ba! Esa mujer me cae mal." You would push her away, ignore her, and even talk trash about her when I was present. Of course, I felt horrible by the way you would talk to her, but deep down I was relieved to know that she didn't mean anything to you. That I was the one who had your heart. Pero no. Al final, ella es tu novia y yo ni tu amiga soy. How dumb was I to be deceived?

It breaks my heart that you keep talking to me.

I know deep in my heart you know how much I like you, you know how naive I am, and you know you were the first person I poured my heart to. Pero no te importo. Maybe you do care, maybe you do like me as much as I do, but tu impaciencia was stronger. You needed someone, and what easier way to date the woman who was constantly atras de tus huesitos.

In your defense, I am una niña de familia, and to date me you have to think twice. Does that mean you only wanted to have fun? You wanted to pasar el tiempo? Was I just a fun game to play?

With all of this said, Mr. I-like-you-but-I-can't-date-you-because-you-are-una-niña-de-familia, I want to share with you, I am resigning. I am resigning from the position you have given me. I cannot deal with mixed feelings.

You still give me butterflies when you come closer and act like you care; like you like me. Y como tonta sigo cayendo en tus redes. I can't be your friend and I can't have small conversations with you, because it is not what I want. Not what I deserve. I cannot keep crying every single night after coming back to reality and realizing I'm only a game for you.

I know you are a good person. I see the way you care for children. I see the way you respect your elders. Pero en donde queda el respeto para mi corazón?

Me gustas. I like you a lot. Pero I've lost respect and love for myself. What's wrong with me? No soy lo suficiente para él? What does she have that I don't? Is my face too long and round? Is my body too deformed? Are my eyes too small? I've never bullied myself like this before. I know love shouldn't drive you to it either.

I cannot keep questioning my value for someone who doesn't respect *his lover*. I will not be that woman who holds on to someone who does not deserve my time or effort.

I deserve someone who cares for me. Who doesn't want to play around. Someone who wants to meet mi mama y mi papa. Who isn't scared to commit because they know I'm worth it. Someone who doesn't make me doubt my value.

So please Mr. I-like-you-but-I-can't-date-you-because-you-are -una-niña-de-familia, I beg you to stop talking to me. To stop glancing at me. I do not deserve to have left over love.

Without love,
Ms. Niña-de-familia

LOVE IS THE MOON

AMB

A spark of a Crescent
The sliver shining and present
Growing unknowingly;
The Waxing Gibbous of my heart
Butterflies and big brown eyes this is the best part
Love becomes Full, I'm finally showing me.
But good things don't stay around for long
How does it start so right and go so wrong?
The brightest Full Moon, but why does it flee?
The Waning Gibbous: where I begin to panic;
How does a moon phase feel so manic?
You love me like the moon loves the sea.
The glimmer of the Crescent is all that's left
Trying to get you back feels like theft
Is this all it will be?
Your heart is no longer mine
The New Moon announces, "it's time"
Love is the moon yet the phases hate me.

ADIÓS MI TIERRA

ESTRELLA ALMAZAN

The time has come for me to try to cross the border. All preparations are complete, and the coyote has been paid. I will leave the home I've known all my life, and my heart aches. My parents hug me while they cry, and I don't want to leave, but I don't have a choice. The land I love has become a war zone because of the cartels.

I break the hug and say, "No se preocupe; todo saldrá bien." (Don't worry; everything will be fine). I turn to my sister, and in her arms, I see the reason I am doing this. My precious daughter that I want to protect and give a better life. I take my daughter into my arms and hand her to my parents.

This will be the last time they get to hold their granddaughter. My mother kisses my daughter's forehead and says, "Dios las bendiga a las dos. Las queremos mucho nunca lo olviden." (May God bless the two of you. We love you, never forget that).

I took my child back and said one last tearful goodbye to all my family. One of the coyotes then ushered me into a car. The drive to the border was about 12 hours, so we had a long way to go. Those 12 hours were spent worrying about what could go wrong. I held my daughter tightly and prayed for everything to go smoothly.

Just a few miles from the border the coyotes took us into a warehouse where a couple waited for us. They would be the ones helping us cross safely. The woman cheerfully introduced herself as Katrina.

"Has pasado la parte más fácil. Ahora es tiempo para la parte difícil, pero no te preocupes; todo estará bien," Karina said. (You have passed the easy part. Now it's time for the hard part, but don't worry; everything will be fine).

She was very kind and reassured me everything would be fine, which provided some comfort. I was curious how they would help me cross the border, so I asked. She looked hesitant to explain at first, which worried me. With some more pushing she explained everything.

I would go into a hidden compartment under the seats while my daughter would be passed off as her and her husband's daughter.

They had all their real daughter's paperwork and since all babies looked alike, she was sure this would work.

I felt uneasy hearing I would be separated from my daughter, but I was already here. We couldn't turn back now. Carefully I handed my daughter to Katrina and said, "Por favor cuídala bien." (Please take care of her).

The car with the hidden compartments was a minivan. I gave my daughter one last kiss before I disappeared into the hidden compartment. The compartment was small, so I was forced to be curled up. I waited, and then suddenly I felt the van moving. It was finally time to cross the border and start anew.

"Vamos hacia la frontera ahora, así que no hagas ningún ruido hasta. Te sacaremos de allí cuando crucemos y estemos seguros," said Katrina (We're going towards the border, so don't make a sound. We will take you out of there when we cross and are safe).

I didn't say anything, knowing they would understand. I don't know how long it took us to get to the border but once we did my heart started racing. I could hear the border patrol agents talking. From what I could hear they were checking documents.

I did my best to hear what I could but suddenly I couldn't understand them. They talked in what to me sounded gibberish. Not being able to understand anything made me panic. My mind began racing wondering if they had somehow figured us out.

Woof! Woof!

Once I heard the dogs, I thought we were done for. All the money, time and effort had amounted to nothing. I prayed that my daughter would be safe. I closed my eyes waiting for the lid to be opened by a border patrol agent.

Seconds felt like hours and then the van started moving. I opened my eyes, thinking perhaps we hadn't been caught. I didn't know what was going on, so my only choice was to remain quiet.

We drove for what felt like hours until the lid of my hiding spot was removed. Katrina's husband helped me out and I stepped out of the van. We were in front of a small house which apparently was a resting spot.

I saw Katrina at the door smiling at me with my sleeping daughter in her arms. She motioned for me to come closer and said, "¡Lo hicimos! Bienvenida a los Estado Unidos de América." (We did it!

Welcome to the United States of America).

My legs felt weak from excitement but also from having been in that cramped space.

Katrina handed my daughter to me, and I began crying. I was so thankful to be here but also sad, for I had left my whole life behind.

Everything I had ever known would become a distant memory because I would never be able to go back. Katrina rubbed my back, trying to offer some comfort. I wiped my tears away and took a deep breath in. There was no time for regrets now; I had made a choice that hopefully would be worth everything I lost.

We got to rest at the house and began the long drive to Fort Worth, where my husband would meet us. It took us seven hours to reach the house of my mother-in-law. When we arrived, my mother-in-law welcomed us into her house.

The years passed but the ache and the longing in my heart would not fade. I did everything to stay connected to my roots but the only thing connecting me to my beloved land was a cheap flip phone. Every night I would call my family and they would tell me everything I missed.

My siblings got married. My brothers became fathers, and my sisters became mothers, but I couldn't see any of their children. I missed them all and couldn't help but cry. After my daily night call with my mother finished, I couldn't help but be sad.

Tears brimmed in my eyes, and my mind began spiraling into negative thoughts. Perhaps coming here had been a mistake. My family was not here, they were in Mexico. I shouldn't be here. This strange land with a language I couldn't understand was not my home.

"Mami?" (Mommy?)

The tired voice of my daughter snapped me out of my thoughts. I wiped my tears as my daughter came to sit next to me. She leaned into me and closed her eyes smiling. She was saying some toddler gibberish I couldn't completely understand. Looking at her I was reminded of why I was here. I picked her up and carried her in my arms softly rocking her to sleep.

Some more years passed, and I was blessed with a son. After three more years I was blessed with a second son. Our family was

perfect but then I found out my daughter had depression.

I came here to give her a better life, but this wasn't a better life. Those years were hell, but I had to be strong for her and for my family. I regretted coming here but no amount of regret would change anything.

With the years my daughter began to heal. The year she graduated from high school she gave me a letter that brought me to tears. Her letter was filled with apologies and thank-you's. I thought I had hidden my longing for my home, but she had noticed.

The day my youngest son graduated from first grade and my oldest son graduated from elementary school, my daughter graduated from high school. As I watched each of them walk across the different stages, I couldn't help but think that everything perhaps had been worth it.

Those days I had spent in sadness were nothing compared to the happiness I saw in my children's eyes. After all the ceremonies, we went home, and when I looked around my home I smiled. We have everything we need and more.

This was what I had always wanted, and I couldn't be happier. The sacrifices I made were definitely worth it. I'm glad I made the choice to leave for a chance at a better life. Though I still miss my beloved land, I know one day I will return. Perhaps when all my children are grown and independent I will go back.

SIN FRONTERAS/WITHOUT BORDERS

CESAR ESPINO

THIRD PLACE POETRY

I lost myself
Establishing myself in a different country
Where I fought to fit in
I've had enough
But I want to feel Mexican
I've been labeled American
I prefer Juanga and Chalino
I like Kayne and N.W.A

I have it Hasta La Raiz
With a nopal en la frente

Indiferente de la fuente
Indifferent than the fountain

I say God Bless
Yo digo Si Dios Quiere
But I will be stuck in between
Literally
Both parents from border town
Juarez and Piedras
El Paso and Eagle Pass
Which Eagle do I follow?

Divided by two cultures
In my own land
Yet, I am a foreigner
In a land that took eight states
A line that divides two people
The human drew the line

Read this backwards

NEW BEGINNINGS

MADISON HUERTAS

SECOND PLACE FICTION

It was not long after I cheerfully walked the stage of my high school graduation that I felt the excitement, dread, and anxiety of post-graduation and early adult life. But who was I to feel this way? I had it all set out for me, a college scholarship at Green University, the four-year ticket to my future as a successful doctor, or lawyer, or whatever my parents wanted me to be.

So, I guess I should start by telling you a little bit about myself. My name is Hanna, and I am a child of European immigrants. As you can imagine, this did not make life easy for me growing up.

From the expectation to be everything from an Olympic level athlete to an academic prodigy, there was always something that I wasn't doing. I spent most of my youth isolated, not allowed to make friends, only confined to school and my sport, swimming. So admittedly, I spent my youth absolutely miserable, thinking this was where the story ended. I was very wrong.

As soon as my senior year rolled around, I began to apply at all the furthest away universities I could find. Did I have any idea what I wanted to study? No. Did I care? No. Did I want to get as far away from small-town North Texas as possible? Yes.

I ended up getting accepted to Green University, thousands of miles away in upstate New York. I was ecstatic; my parents, however, were not. I got lecture after lecture about how horrible my college life would be without them and how ungrateful I was for leaving. But what I learned was that some things must be done. This story isn't about that though, so let me tell you the real story.

I, myself, drove my 2000 Nissan Sentra all the way from Texas to New York by myself. I was thousands of miles away, by myself, although that part wasn't new. The hot late summer sun beat down as I unloaded box after box from my small, beat-up sedan. I became friendly with my dorm mates and the students in the surrounding rooms. The first day of school begins, and I ease my way through the small, scenic campus to my classes, smiling at strangers along the way. I complete my classes and hit the books before going to bed,

almost my same routine as my lonely high school days.

That's when it hit me. How could I feel so alone in college when I never had anything to begin with? I spent high school eating lunch in the bathroom, never even getting asked to a single homecoming or prom. I never saw a problem with it though, attributing my shy nature to my controlling, foreign parents. Did it really take moving thousands of miles away to realize that I'm just lonely?

This was a question I pondered on for quite some time. As in high school, making friends was not my specialty.

A month or two into the semester, I wandered into a scenic sitting area near the library. The spot was nice, quiet, and secluded, a good place to get some work done. Upon moving one of the chairs, however, I made a life changing discovery.

Half of a bright pink "BFF FOREVER" necklace made from string and beads. Only I recognized this necklace because I made it. Over a decade ago. The one best friend I had ever had was the recipient, her name was Claire, but she had disappeared halfway through the year in third grade. Well, not exactly disappeared, but moved away without notice. After Claire, I never felt a need to make any more friends because somehow, I was so content with myself, but this made me think otherwise.

Upon retrieval of my elementary school yearbook and having to learn how to use the social media I was previously banned from for the first time, I managed to find Claire, finding out she also attended Green and that she had kept the necklace near and dear to her heart, devastated when it slipped out of a box on move in day.

So, I had just found my estranged childhood best friend thousands of miles away from my hometown. Not only that, I had managed to make another friend, Hanz, as a result of Claire's social skills and my lack thereof.

I finally had everything I dreamed of. I was away from home and had made friends for the first time in my life. But when I found that necklace, I learned something about myself. My immediate reaction was to be negative, and in that I discovered that I had a choice to be a product of my upbringing, or to make myself a new beginning.

Over the next several years, college life was brutal. Claire quickly became a party girl while I preferred to hit the books, Hanz

preferred to Google his assignments and spend most of his days confined to his bed and television.

Even though I drifted apart from my first ever friends, for the first time in my life I had learned something. I was on an adventure to be a popular nobody instead of myself. I was stuck between being a product of my upbringing or becoming somebody I knew I wasn't. It took the hurt of making new friends for me to find my new beginning.

IN THE PURSUIT OF NORMAL

HARRIS MATTHEWS

CONTENT WARNING: ABLEIST LANGUAGE

When I was two years of age, I couldn't speak
Or wouldn't speak, it is unclear
I learned to sign, I fumbled around my fingers and hand to show I
 wanted something
I needed a specific grape juice or cereal, it always had to be same
 kind, any change was too much to bear
When I was four years of age, I would organize my little toy soldiers
 by orientation and weaponry
I began to speak with an impediment; I couldn't even say my own
 name without fumbling the R's
I was placed in special classes because I couldn't sit still in the over-
 whelming void they called a testing room
The noises were made unbearable by the unnerving silence like
 breathing or the scratch of the eraser
It was all I could hear
I couldn't take it
My humor didn't click with my peers, it was like speaking another
 language
They heard about me being in the special classes later
They called me a retard

I prayed every night to be normal
"Please, God, let me be normal."
"Please, God, I just want to fit in."
"Please, God, I just want a friend."

He never answered the prayers of the small retard he created

REVOLUTIONARY WRITING

SELINA HUMPHREY

I believe in the original meaning of revolution: *to come back around*, not to be confused with revolt: *to rise up*. Rhetorical manipulation guides the blind to kiss the same hand that beats them. *Have you been a victim?* Why choose to wield words as weapons when the spirit of the people hangs in tumultuous balance under the rule of a patriarchal system built to mimic the structure it mocks? *Land of the-whatever you say*. Without comity in governance, what is the fate of a polarized humanity?

I have had the honor of reading colleagues' work that makes me feel as if I have found home: *do you know what AI is doing with your face?* A place where likeminded ramblings effect change, create art in brilliant capacity: *acrostic poetry of love and beauty*. Philosophical authors leave me breathless when conveying truths about identity and love: My jaw dropped lower and wider with every line of "The Laugh of The Medusa." *She is no monster; fear her, nonetheless*. Shock and awe overtook me when reading *Bootstraps*, and tears flooded my face when responding to the idea of losing a part of oneself to become another: *assimilation is denial of personhood*. *Borderlands* depicted navigating the shadow self: *the only way to live authentically is to embrace the paradox within and honor both the dark and the light*.

I believe that human beings are neither this nor that, but rather divinity incarnate. *If God is universal, are we all not his people?* Love is love is love is love and what the world needs most is unconditional love. *Jesus lives through us, but who is your Jesus?* I have marched side by side with people of all genders, races, and social classes with signs that scream for freedom from oppressors. *Must women, queer people, and insert your explicative expletive here still fight the battle to be seen as human?* I have walked with the broken hearted for suicide prevention; sweat, tears, and fatigue could never compare to the pain of remembering those who ended their lives and those who march on every second of everyday to remain alive. *Did you too speak life into your mother as she repeatedly chose to die while you continue to live?* I dream of a day that the daily gunfire passing

off as “fireworks” ceases before one of my children is murdered, because those without words turn to guns. *You can take my land, but I still insist on the right to bear arms against your quid pro quo.* Will society not awaken before everyone is dead?

I speak out in the face of injustice to shine a light on the wrongs of the world in the form of autotheory, where writing becomes a rebellious act to proclaim that I will unashamedly share my personal stories with a *fuck* and a *you*, and a *wake up, please — do you only respond to such extremes*— to those who think people like me lesser than for being grounded in reality while able to stand upon the pulpit of honored philosophy, the likes of which no person, educated or not, can ever deny my voice. *Will you always oppose truth?*

I believe that empathy is the greatest underrated trait; traits can be learned and honed. *Ask my autistic son who was told empathy must be learned through watching television shows as his childish touch continues to bless the gentlest of Earth’s creatures.* Guarding the light of self while still illuminating dark spaces can guide the lost back home, raise them from their knees, back to the space that should, could, and will again, always feel secure. *I’m still trying, are you?* I believe in the spirit of the wild and free, once referred to as the artless because popular culture has always been an enigma to the upper class. Poetry was born by the commoner who sang as they worked. *What are you doing now?* Teller of tales left forgotten if not revered by those preserving what it means to be human.

I believe *I write* because I must. I believe *I write* because I still can. *I knowingly do so in the face of all who wrote before me that died in their efforts to do as I seek to do.* I believe because one day everyone will understand revolution and return back to peace, and I will write and write and write and write until my soul is but a mirror of progress. I believe *I write* because I fear the day of a voiceless world — *Can you join me? Will you?*

THE GODDESS AND HER MUSE

CAMERON DUDZINSKI

Like an inferno, her breast ignites so bright,
Overwhelming confidence, a man's pure delight,
Vows exchanged through the amorous night,
Eternal chains, love's radiant light.

A scarlet knitted thread, hand in hand,
No space for partition, her notion to understand,
Duality merged, love's ever-evolving grand.

Beneath the star's soft silver hue,
Elegance discovered in all you do,
Aesthetics found in every view,
Unveiling grace, forever true,
Timeless embraces, soft like morning dew
Yearning heart drawn towards you.

THE END OF AN ERA

ROY BOWEN

The safety and calm of the 1950's began to disappear into the noise and chaos of the 1960's. Neighborhood schools, church attendance, and downtown shopping began to weaken where we went, with whom, and why.

As my generation grew into late teens, then college at TWC, the emerging trends and issues of our day and time were not to be denied:

- Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changin'"
- LBJ
- Five Man Electric Band's "Signs"
- Stamps
- Peter, Paul, & Mary's "Where Have All the Flowers Gone"
- Angela Davis
- The Whole Earth Catalog
- Pete Seeger's "Turn! Turn! Turn!" and "We Shall Overcome"
- Woodstock—the music, rain, and event made the world stop and pay attention
- Poor People's March
- James Baldwin
- Peace Corp
- Vietnam Wall
- Nixon
- Gun deaths of MLK and RFK
- Moon Walks
- Detroit and Watts burning

John Kennedy told us we could go to the moon and save the world too. Then a generational hero was murdered in public, in front of all of us. I was walking between classes when this terrible news brought many of us together, clinging to each other in the student union building.

Whatever was the safety and sureness of my parent's world

was no more. We young, inexperienced students witnessed an era's end, and the responsibilities of a new era beginning: our own. We looked to TWC faculty, to classrooms, subjects, and to each other in order to make it through.

John Kennedy's assassination launched my generation to listen to and see society, communities, and individuals in new ways. We no longer accepted the historic divisions of race, language, culture, or the economic "haves" and "have-nots." We questioned why so many were never intended to be included in the American dream, and with red lining, no right to vote, and education denied, these "so many issues," never would be.

Alice Wonders, O. D. Bounds, Jess Lord, and other faculty affirmed for us the world could be, would be different. Each gave us reason for our education, learning new skills, methods, and approaches. The common campus message was "you are ready, you are needed, now go, save us all, change the world."

And go out we did.

Some found a role in research and development of new systems of leadership, of ownership of property, of ensuring an open door to economic and educational change. Many made a more immediate impact through Peace Corp, first teacher programs, and local and state governmental agencies. There was no place too far; no cause too large.

Black people, Latine people, the poor, the left out, and we who were white and never left out, got to know each other at marches, protests, and council meetings. Petitions were signed. Chanting at barricades was normal.

Always there was music and speakers in crowded malls and streets. The music and speakers challenged us to take risks of individual safety for the public good and to advance the cause. By saving the whales and rainforests, the rest of the world would be saved, and maybe we would be too.

Then, even for us, the next degree, kids and family and the upward climb of success and employment shifted our eyes and hearts to our own sense of security and comfort. We forgot about the critical importance of staying, of continuing the values of the resistance, and the push for a kinder, gentler world of systems, structures, and policies.

Power, control, and the influence of money on public decision-making did retreat, but never far. In time, we focused on different priorities and different problems to solve. Under our more muddled gaze, our era ended and our presence in our desire to give peace a chance.

History is not limited to a classroom or a conference. In 2023, history can teach, and be a guide of what went right and what went wrong. History tells us we are not blindfolded, even in this time of societal upset and tumultuous upheaval and change.

The digital world of phones, iPads, social platforms, 24/7 connections, WAH, online everything, and national and international news live streaming has shoved aside the ways we as young ones learned, moved outward, and made a difference. Last month a twelve-year-old girl raised 2 million dollars for water wells in Africa through her GoFundMe account. We never did that, not once.

With satellites and webcam video of urban and rural areas, mountains, and forests, today's generation is well prepared to change the world, or at least stabilize the pace of deforesting the rainforest, the melting Arctic ice cap, and starvation in eastern Africa due to prolonged drought.

The 2023 generation will use AI to present the right argument to five different funding or policy groups in mere moments. With so much individual, group, and corporate knowledge and influence, changing the possible is nearer to achievement, and yet, with so many options, it is harder to be clear on who and what there is to achieve.

Mass shootings, handguns, and "stranger danger" have closed doors once opened for local, state, or national governmental advocacy. White males and white dominance have forever defined the agenda, priorities, and who is at the table, especially at the head of the table.

But no longer. Black people and Latine people have their own agendas and priorities, and rightly so. Women of all colors are no longer waiting for permission to take the lead as CEO, President, Judge, Owner, and their own chair at the head of the table. Indigenous groups have organized, with long-delayed grievances, political policies and increased recognition for their role in decision making, and their place at the table.

To adapt a movie line from *JAWS*, “we are going to need a bigger table.”

Today’s student generation has traded the lunch counter sit-in for Zoom gatherings where they build partnerships on campus in Los Angeles and Hong Kong. Today’s students will not pile into cars to drive to a state capital or Washington, D.C. to carry signs or be inspired to action by the voices and sounds seen and heard by thousands. Today’s student is inspired by similar messaging while in their own apartment or concert hall.

There is common ground with my 1960’s s generation and the 2023 student generation, however differently perceived and experienced:

- Leaders: Those who inspire point outward and push us forward. Our public leaders were far fewer, less diverse, and less accessible through YouTube channels, platforms, or news panels.
- Media: Videos and recording of the underserved, left-behind or never-included are on display in museums and public centers of race and cultural, historical or online storytelling, or by one of the traveling recording vans parked on a public square.
- Gatherings: Technology can bring together so many, so quickly. And yes, there are still marches, signs, and speakers, but today more in Europe than on the U. S. Campus. Gatherings are more informal, topic centered, and consensus led.
- Music: There is always music and messaging, but music not within my elderhood awareness. My trust and my heritage are that the music will always call us out, push us forward and hold us accountable. One desired outcome of this writing is my exposure to new artists. Odetta, Seeger, and Dylan still speak to all life stages, but are now less heard, less known.
- Staying: A limitation of my generation was the requirement for onsite, ongoing presence. Today’s students can monitor consistent and long-term outcomes from any part of the globe. The application of technology to monitor and record the activity and designed outcomes of research, programs, and environmental improvements is a “game changer.”

- Faculty: TWU's 2023 faculty are at the highest level of background, culture awareness, and purpose-driven education. Today's faculty understand the meaning of "learn here, apply anywhere." Today's faculty are essential to the motivation, support, and education to prepare and sustain the 2023 student to engage, develop, and strengthen communities, cultures, and peoples.
- Believers: In order to transform, to make better, to shift the balance of power, Believers of the Possible are required. The 2023 student generation is challenged by deep divisions, injustice, and groups and individuals who are under resourced. The 2023 student generation also reads, sees, and experiences individuals, groups, and cultures who heal divisions, seek justice, and create the technology and systems of care and hope that are healthy and transformative. Without Believers, there is no Transformation.

In summary, every student generation faces their own "end of an era." Each generation, 1960 and 2023, applies technology, emerging skills, curiosity, and subject focus on outcome goals to be achieved, or at least attempted. My last words to the 2023 student generation are to not allow a divided world to divide your heart or your spirit. Perhaps "change" has always been the wrong word, mission or message. If we can push the reset button, influence alignments and begin the hard, long work of transformation, the 2023 student generation will have gone further, made the world better in real time in ways we of the 1960's, in spite of our best and true efforts, did not.

DEAR MARI

KENNETH NGUYEN
FIRST PLACE FICTION

CONTENT WARNING: BODY HORROR

A man sits on a cliff, staring at the sky towering over him. He's wearing a bulky suit of armor with a red and blue hue with white trims running across it. The helmet is in the shape of a cylinder with numerous lights on its sides, like the many eyes of an insect. A backpack latches onto his rear, carrying multiple pipes that pump a strange green substance into his body.

The rock face he rests on is desolate. There are no trees that stand, no animals that can call it home, and no water to quench his thirst. The area around it is a vast wasteland, faring no better than the cliff. Dryland runs across for miles away, lacking any sign of life.

The sky above is horrifying. All the stars are missing, and the once beautiful blue sky is now a mixture of purple and red, like one lucid dream.

Despite the horrid scenery, the man has no words. He stands up and turns around. A long row of stones rests in front of him, each separate from the other. Inscribed on them are names with a chalky black texture.

His hands gently pet one of the stones, brushing against its name: "Mari." Next to it is a photo frame. Inside of it is a picture: a ginger man standing next to a beautiful Asian woman next to a large oak tree. The trunk of the tree shows a carving that says "MxA." Their smiles shake the man under his metallic. After a few seconds, he hesitantly pulls away.

The man pulls a latch on his waist, opening a panel. He pulls out a small notebook. It's a pair of brown crusty leather sandwiches, piles of papers with moldy ends, with a piece of string keeping it together. He flips through the pages, passing through dozens of blurry black words, until he finds an empty sheet. A stick of black mineral rests between the paper. He grabs it and presses it against the book, leaving behind black chalk.

Dear Mari, I confirmed it. I nearly traversed through every corner of this foul landscape. I'm the last human being on Earth. Next

to you rests the names of every person I've found. The previous holder of this book documented a series of people who were alive after the collapse. I tried to find them, though sadly, I was too late.

He traverses down to the rocky cliff. At the base stands a mighty beast. It has the body of a horse and six human appendages for its limbs on each side. His hand rests upon its neck. Its jaw relaxes as it shakes its head in joy, unaware of its horrid mutation.

The man hops on the beast's back. He softly kicks its side, making the steed walk. Its numerous limbs crawl through the wasteland like a spider traversing a wall.

Everything doesn't make sense. Chaos is the only rule that is ironclad in this world now. Logic and physics are now a distant myth.

They travel through the wasteland. Numerous crystals stand in their path, each with unique colors ranging from black to turquoise. Large cracks are spread throughout the earth, leading into dark abysses the man dares not to cross.

Eventually, they would enter a city, or what is left. Numerous cars stand on the streets, with parts missing or having gigantic bite-sized holes. Every building and piece of debris floats in the air, hovering over the streets like clouds. A noteworthy structure is a green statue that hangs upside down, wielding a torch aimed at the city's center. On the tip, there's an old strip of cloth dangling on it. The words "New York is Still Fighting" are inscribed on it in yellow.

I can still remember everything, Mari, when the Moon and Sun transformed. That's when everything turned wrong. I can still recall your face on that day, my face, our friend's faces-

The man and the horse pass through the many automobiles. But they halt, noticing an ominous glow piercing the floating debris and shining upon them. They look up, seeing the moon, a creeping smile dragging across its surface as two crater-like eyes stare down. It does nothing as it stares at the human, only staring, watching, mocking.

Their faces.

They travel through the streets, the horse's many limbs leaping over the hoods of the cars like a frog.

Klink! Clack!

The beast pauses as the two turn to the right, hearing the sound of metal hitting against each other. A figure rises from a

nearby truck. It's human in size and shape but with charcoal-black skin. Black crystals grow from its eye sockets as it carries an open gaping mouth. In its hands are two metal parts. The creature bangs them mindlessly together, like a child recklessly playing with bricks.

The man observes the creature, using the chance to write.

I still don't know what the sun did to people. Anyone who stared at it for too long turned different. They're not dead, but they're certainly no longer human. At one point, curiosity took over, and I looked, just for a little bit. Now, the only way I get my words out is through these books. But the moon hasn't done anything. Maybe it just likes watching us, like we're ants.

They leave through a freeway. The structure still stands tall, with a few automobiles lying around.

I doubt I'll ever understand how the sun and moon turned out like they did. Why did it decide to ruin Earth? Was it some higher being? Maybe it got mad at us. Or they just wanted to reset the world to try something different. I bet you would've figured it out. You always loved finding out about unknowns.

Rumble! Rumble!

The man nearly drops his black chalk as the ground beneath them shakes. He steers the horse to the edge, knocking his feet against its rear. The steed nods and uses its hands to climb over the freeway. It crawls underneath the structure, dangling upside down, while the man hugs the creature tightly.

Rumble! Rumble!

Everything starts shaking more violently. A few pieces from the structure fall as the ground itself jumps. The man looks outside, his hands anxiously clinging onto the horse, his palms visibly shaking.

Long human arms appear on each side of the freeway, quietly tapping against the ground. Hundreds of enormous appendages follow each varying in size. But every single one looks different as if none of them belongs with each other.

The two could only hang under the structure and wait patiently, watching the army of limbs pass them in horror.

One of the limbs pauses, turning over underneath the freeway. Its hand opens up, revealing two holes in the palm. The openings begin to suck in air as the limb slithers towards the duo like

a serpent.

The man stares nervously at the incoming appendage. His horse grows anxious, but the human pets it by the mane, attempting to calm them down. He wonders if he should fight it or sway its direction.

The limb's sniffing continues as it closes in, only a few inches away from the two. But before it could finish, it started moving away. All the arms drift away from the freeway, pulling any straying appendages.

They wait a few minutes before the horse slowly crawls out from under. A shadowy figure stands at a distance. Its outline is blob-shaped, with hundreds of long appendages under it, supporting its massive weight. The horrifying shadow eventually disappears from the human's sight, hopefully forever.

Their journey now resumes. Luckily, no other obstacles stand in their way on the freeway. At the end of the long road lies a void. A literal sea of darkness that nearly eats at the path. The man pokes his head over, finding no reflection. In that null space, a boat floats. It's a fisherman's vessel with a figure resting on its port side. The boatsman's appearance hides behind a singular long piece of red cloth.

Hesitant, the man leaps off his steed and waves for the boatsman's attention.

It turns its body, revealing its head as a large lamp, radiating a faint orange glow, its body made of smoke. A vapor hand reaches out to a nearby oar that stands twice the size of an average man. It uses it to push against the void, levering the boat to the road.

The boatsman raises its hand and places it on the human's helmet. But he feels no touch, only a comforting breeze that brushes against his body. It rescinded its palm and pointed behind him, shaking its glowing head.

He looks back to see the horse standing there, waiting for their friend. The human clenches his hand as he approaches the steed. His hand rises to its mane and softly caresses it. It seemingly understands and nuzzles his helmet's visor. The two stand there a moment before the horse turns and walks away.

Alone, the human turns to the boatman. It nods and moves to the side, extending its arm, welcoming him to its boat.

They disembark from the road and begin sailing across the

void. As the boatman steers the ship, the man sits on the deck, opening his journal.

I don't know why I'm the last human alive. Maybe the sun and moon wanted someone to travel the world and see what they created. Did they want to boast about the new world they made? Mock me with their horrifying creations? Or simply just to torture me? At least being the only one doesn't mean I'm not alone. I had a friend. I think you would've loved him. I certainly did.

He takes a break from his book, turning over to view the void. The road is gone, the deformed sky barely visible, and the vacuum surrounding them. It's nearly suffocating yet so magnetic as if the darkness pulls him in, telling him everything will be alright. But the man rips his head away, ignoring the void's sweet whispers. His emotionless helmet stays on the journal like a beacon.

There's not much time left. There are so many questions, yet no answers. But I don't want to know or understand. This world is too much for me, and I'm too tired. But don't worry Maria, I'll meet you at our usual place.

The boat comes to a halt. The man turns to see lush green land with beautiful sunflowers and whistling birds. In the middle is a strip of bricks, making a path. He steps into the fresh earth and turns to the boatman.

It was already gone like smoke.

He continues his walk. His footsteps thud against the brick road, and his legs turn sluggish. The backpack becomes empty of green fluids, and the lights on his helmet turn off. Blue skies and fluffy clouds hang over him like a beautiful painting. Part of him wishes he could just fly and join it.

I tried to live through this new world for you, but I can't anymore. I hope you can forgive me. Maybe one day we'll-

He attempts to write more, only to finish the last page. His fingers drop the black chalk, watching it disappear in the blades of grass. Nevertheless, he continues his march.

A few minutes passed, and he could hear something: laughter. He hears the hardy howls of a man and the chipper giggles from a woman. It seeps into his head, fueling him with the energy to keep walking.

Then, he makes it to the end of the road. The road of bricks

ends with a large oak tree standing in front of him. On its trunk is the carving “MxA.” He drops to the ground, resting his body against the oak. A few moments pass by as he catches his breath.

The quiet seconds end as a gigantic ball of fire arrives from the sky. Inside it, a creeping darkness manifests, forming a scowl. It expands, unleashing its illuminating light onto the lonely human, consuming him.

Mari, I'm here.

RHYTHM OF TIME

CHASE DI IULIO

“Without you I cannot be,
With you the seconds stand still”

Like the wind to the rain
Softly blowing, yet
Immensely powerful
And fueling the storm

Like the sun
On the backs of turtles resting on logs
You embrace me with warmth
And a sense of safety everlasting

Like a deference for darkness
You exude comfort
But also linger a sense
Of danger and mystery

Like a star in the sky
I miss you during the sunshine
Though I know you're still there
Just invisible to my sight

Like shadows in dark corridors
I sit alone sulking
And waiting
For your return

YEAR...

ESTRELLA ALMAZAN

Year 1...

Year 20...

Year 100...

Year 1000...

Year 5000...

Year...

How long has it been? How many times have I died and been reborn? How much longer do I have to go through this hell?! I just want to rest, but the Gods will not allow this.

This is my punishment for defying the Gods. They give me life and strip me of all my past memories. The painful memories of my first life disappear. The memories of subsequent lives become distant dreams. For a few years, I got to live in blissful ignorance until my awakening.

The day of awakening is always plagued with nightmares and misfortune. The memories which had disappeared flood my mind making my torture resume.

I try to endure it, but I always hit a breaking point. It's too much to handle... the voices haunt me; the images of war plague my dreams. My anger pushes me to hurt those around me. My sadness isolates me and leaves me to suffer alone.

There is only one escape to this hell. Though I know it's only temporary, I go to the raging river for a restart. I am born again with temporary peace.

The memories come to haunt me when I turn 22 but this time it's different. Traces of the past come back for revenge and the memories appear three years too early.

My first thought is to run to the river, but I can't. The people around me are caught in the crossfire, and I have to protect them. The burden of the past is mine to bear. I must ensure that war that has broken out is won. I must ensure the survival of my people. I must ensure the peace of this world. I alone-

You shouldn't carry this burden alone. We are here. I am here...

His voice snapped me out of my thoughts. His arms were

wrapped around me tightly, trying to comfort me. His embrace is warm and full of kindness just like Kian.

I push him away before my mind can wander anymore. Kian is dead and the one in front of me is Zoran. Zoran is here, not Kian. I feel my eyes start to water and I cover my face. I shouldn't be acting this way but I'm tired of keeping everything in.

Zoran takes my hands, revealing my crying face. He smiles softly and says, "I can't change the past and I can't make everything magically better, but I'll always be here for you."

I don't deserve someone as kind as him. Since the moment we met, he had been everything I needed. A person I could talk to and rely on. He understood me and was patient waiting for me to open up in my own time. Despite the many times I pushed him away, he never left and just gave me the space I needed.

He had done what no one else had been able to do. He gave me hope and a new desire to live. "Why are you so kind to me?" I asked.

"Because I love you," he answered. His voice was clear and held no hesitation. "I understand that Kian is still in your heart, but I hope one day you will be able to open your heart to me."

"I am a horrible person who doesn't deserve you, but I still love you! I keep asking myself if it's okay for me to love you even though I already know the answer is no!" I say through sobs.

Zoran hugs me tightly and says, "Please love me and never stop. I am begging you to allow yourself to love me."

"When this is over, I want to tell you how I feel properly," I said, hugging him back.

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"Let's get this over as soon as possible then!" he said cheerfully.

Once I allowed myself to open up and let others in, things started getting better. I became stronger and with the help of those I loved, we defeated the evil that had threatened our peace. I was able to let go of the past and be free.

Just like I had promised as soon as the war was over, I ran to Zoran. We were all bloody and beat up, but I couldn't wait any longer. I stood a couple feet away from him panting from running.

I smiled at him with tears in my eyes as I screamed, "I love you!"

He smiled wide and ran towards me full speed. We fell to the floor laughing in a tangled mess. He kissed me and said, "I love you too."

CAT RAISE

MIRANDA REESE

To: Miranda Reese

From: Ben Reese

RE: Concerns about your current payment strategy

Hello Miranda,

I am reaching out because I no longer feel my pay rate reflects the immense contributions I make towards this household. I have been working for this family for a little over a year, and I have yet to see a pay increase since you switched my colleague Jinks and me from kitten food to big boy cat food in August of last year. In that time, I have grown significantly in my professional abilities in a way that would warrant at least two to three more treats a month.

For your convenience and record-keeping purposes, I have compiled a list of my contributions:

- Being a good little guy
- Having a round, rub-able belly
- Smelling shoes
- Dramatically reducing the number of feathers on strings in the household
- Seeing to the cleanliness of all rugs and throw pillows (by vomiting on them)
- Having a handsome little face
- If a mouse or perhaps a bird ever does get in the house, I will get it
- Being a very cuddly baby

By my extensive calculations, I've found that since my inception into the household, the consumption of wet food and little treats has become 30% more efficient, printer paper has stayed warm for 50% longer (because I lay on them), and the overall vibes of the house have been about 20-60% higher on the whole.

As you can see, I am an incredible asset to your household, and if I wasn't absolutely terrified of every other human being on the

planet, I could easily get 2, maybe even 3 more spoonfuls of Friskies Meaty Bits a week at another household. However, since you are the only non-terrifying human I've come across, I am willing to take a much humbler pay raise to maintain my current position. I am simply asking for one additional chicken and tuna puree tube treat with my dinner each evening. I think we can both agree that this is an incredibly reasonable request, and I eagerly await your response.

-BDR

(translated & transcribed by Miranda Reese)

A SOUP THAT TASTES LIKE HOME

SAFFRON MAASZ

FIRST PLACE CREATIVE NONFICTION

To my mother,
All that I am, I owe to you.
Yours, ladybug

My mother became a different woman when I became sick. Somehow the stuffy nose and swollen tonsils would bring out a gentler side of her. Independence was a customary quality when growing up in a single-parent household, so when I did become sick a part of me would bask in my own sickness. A cooling touch of my mother's hand always seemed to be worth the queasiness of an upset stomach or the soreness of a scratchy throat. Motherhood looked best on my mother when I was sick. She would put her delicate fingers into my hair, making my room not so sickly and my nose suddenly not so stuffy. She would gently rub Vicks on my feet and chest, reassuring me that I would feel better soon.

My favorite part of being sick is when my mother would hide away in the kitchen, filling the air with the familiar and comforting aroma of caldo de pollo that would make my mouth salivate. Sometimes, I would creep out of my bedroom and drift into the kitchen, the coolness of the tile hitting my feet, and see my mother hovering over the stove. She would beckon me over with a gentle wave of her hand and I would take my place at the dinner table, which was always set with fresh flowers.

As my mother continued to cook, she would often share stories of her youth, or I would confide to her about my troubles. Over time, I came to realize that the best conversations we had were over a warm bowl of soup. The comforting aroma of the broth and the tender vegetables and meat floating in it would envelop us in a sense of warmth and comfort. It was as if the soup had the power to transform our humble kitchen into a sanctuary of sorts, where we could share our deepest thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or rejection. My mother would write off the soup as a mixture of simple ingredients but as a child, I was secretly convinced

that the soup was magic as I would always feel rejuvenated after eating it.

As I grew older, many things changed. I moved out of reach from my mother's arms and into the busy city of Santa Barbara, California. The seafoam green sea and the lush grass covering the hillsides should have screamed of home, but as time went on everything became a dull resemblance of home. Soon homesickness took the shape of everything and not even my mother's voice could give me the comfort I needed. I missed the tangible moments from my mother. I missed her laughter and her gentle hands. I missed using her makeup and rummaging through her closet and jewelry boxes for date night. I missed the spontaneous brunches. But most of all I missed my mother's cooking.

"Can you repeat that one more time, Ma?" I asked as I craned my neck unnaturally to keep my phone from falling as I hastily wrote down my mother's recipe for the caldo de pollo. I was living in a strange city, thousands of miles away from my mother, and after months of living off California takeout and ramen noodles, I wanted something from home. Her voice came out as a weird disruption of sound as she was overseas at the time in Italy. We were further from each other than ever before and I felt the weight of adulthood to be a little heavy and a little lonely. I felt like life was a few sizes too big, like when I was four and tried on my mother's red high heels to feel adult: a poor imitation. My mother read me the recipe one more time and sent me her love and hung up a little too soon for comfort.

I brought most of the ingredients from the local farmers market down the street and I was eager to try and recreate my childhood dish. I followed all her directions carefully, making sure to add the proper measurements and ingredients. I stirred the pot anxiously and tasted the soup every time I put a new ingredient in. The kitchen felt colder and empty without my mother and her stories. Who would've thought that I would miss the times I was sick? When the dish was finished cooking, I handed my roommate his bowl, and soon after I was flooded with compliments and admiration for my dish. But when I tasted the soup, I was left with a disappointed feeling in my chest and a heavy ball of weight forming at the back of my throat.

This was not my mother's soup.

I found that the soup I made wasn't bad, it just had no reminiscence of home. Instead of curing my homesickness, it enhanced it. Without my mother's touch, the soup seemed like a weak imitation. The ingredients were the same, but it failed to have the same profound effect that I remember as a child. I called my mother later that evening and she told me that the main ingredient in making any food is the energy you put into it. She then joked that the reason the soup didn't taste the same was that it didn't have the ingredient of a mother's love. I laughed, but a deeper part of me believed that she was right. There was no other explanation for why the soup tasted unfamiliar, other than the missing ingredient of my mother's love. A few months later I found myself back home.

I think one of the biggest lessons I learned from trying to perfectly replicate my mother's soup is the realization that one of the most crucial ingredients in any meal I make is the energy and love that is cultivated around making the dish itself. Caldo de pollo isn't special to me because it's a flavorful and delicious dish. Caldo de pollo is special and dear to me because my mother attached loving memories to the dish. With every sip, the soup tells me:

"You are loved."

"You are cared for."

"You will be better again."

"You are home."

And that doesn't just come from throwing ingredients into a pot. I find myself making dishes with love more often; I also find that I have my mother's gentle hands. I see them when I cut onions and make my favorite dishes. I see her hands when I put on my favorite jewelry or wash a dirty dish. I see her hands when I do the laundry or when I run my own delicate fingers through my hair and just like that, I get the nostalgia of my childhood through my fingertips. Above all, I see my mother's gentle hands when I take care of the people I love. If I look hard enough, my mother's love is all around.

Now that I am older, I know caldo de pollo won't cure the flu or cure homesickness. But I do know that a mother's love goes deeper than any physical bounds. A mother's love can travel to you in many forms, even unexpected ones like in the form of good soup.

MOM OF MESSES

SELINA HUMPHREY

SECOND PLACE CREATIVE NONFICTION

I could smell it from the living room where I was getting caught up on the mounds of laundry that amassed due to the sheer number of children and messes that accrue, every second, of every day. I had let him sleep in because you don't wake the beast. Pre-toddlerhood is as rewarding as you see in the perfect social media posts with strategically placed smiles and cuddles, but it is also a hellish nightmare, especially when you must clean up the smearing of shit from the majority of a household.

Whoever invented onesies is a bitch. Those snaps that you fumble with when your hands are shaking from holding your 20-pound turkey of a squirming baby just don't work. Why must there be at least 5 of them on each tiny little flap? Why is it so difficult for me to snap them, and yet they are so easily undone by someone who can't even keep pureed carrots in their mouth? One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Secured. Yeah right, baby Houdini will show you otherwise.

I followed my nose like a bloodhound that knew exactly where the sought-out disaster was. He had a smile on his face as if he just had the best playdate in the entire world, a play date with his own shit. "You little monkey poo-flinger!"

In the Chinese zodiac, the monkey is active, witty, and clever. The monkey is also a symbol of Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, who shows himself to be brave, intelligent, talented, and born from stone. Monkeys, in this culture, are also said to protect children from evil spirits. How ironic.

You can't say the word shit to a baby, or before you know it, you have a toddler walking around screaming, "SHIT!" in public. The

wide eyes of a judging society will remind you that you are, in fact, a shit mom. Mierda might be acceptable, but then again, just stick to poo or poop. That nasty, foul, mushy, vomit-inducing, multi-colored (depending on the food that was eaten that day) shit, I mean poop.

Like a robot, I start my decontamination process. First, the baby. Has he developed some immunity to *E. coli*? A face with shit as moisturizer. Hair with shit as gel. Wipes will work for the moment until I can get him into the bath. Next, the room. Walls with shit as finger paint. Crib rails—just, no.

The joy of motherhood. The blessings of tiny little humans whom you nurture and love and cuddle and—No one ever talks about the negative. The hour upon hours of screaming fits that coincidentally happen every night at the witching hour of 3am. “Is my baby possessed by a demon creature from Hell? Did a fairy come in at midnight and switch MY baby with ROSEMARY’S baby?” The hitting, the biting, the breaking of all things, the toys that never shut up, so you let the batteries die and never replace them, and the ever-present feeling of constant failure.

Cleaning the rails is the worst. The shit settles in the groves of the custom crafted wood and dries, making it damn near impossible to remove every tiny particle. So, I pep talk myself into doing this hour-long process. Every day. Why did I insist on an antique piece of furniture from when grandpas used to whittle wood into the most intricate of designs? I probably should have just used it for premium firewood and replaced it with a blow-up swimming pool.

The Chinese Zodiac can also break down animals into elements. A wood monkey, for instance, is optimistic, dreamy, intelligent, on time, and dependable. I’m a metal monkey, though. One would assume that metal would mean strong. In other words: “Do not ever mess with this monkey!” Funny. Sophisticated. Hardheaded. Coincidentally, the best suited job for a monkey is an animal groomer.

Motherhood is one big glorified literal shitshow. A constant season finale of the current melodrama that all your friends are watching too. It never skips a precious beat. At its best, it has me reveling in the wonderment of creation itself, where nothing could ever fulfill me in such a way that being called “Mom” does. At its worst, my friends will call me at midnight, when they can’t sleep either, to tell me that it probably isn’t the best idea to advertise that I have “a baby poo flinger for sale to the highest bidder.” No one will ever believe that MY precious baby is capable of such atrocities as described in the manic post, because 1.2k pictures of the most adorable thing that was ever born unto this earth prove me wrong. Ain’t that some shit!

SINK SUNK GONE

CARMEN FLORES

I never knew darkness till he said hello.

It's quite funny how deep you realize that you're in the hole.

S
 I
 N
 K
 I
 N
 g...

I go.

Till I disappear forever

And I'm left with this fever.

With nowhere else to go

He told me forever.

But here I am sinking in the dark

He left his mark.

And I continue to sink.

Sink

Sink

Sunk,
I'm gone.

PERSONAL ESSAY

SUE ELIASON

CONTENT WARNING: DRUG ABUSE, VIOLENCE

My name is Sue, and I am an addict.

“Hi, Sue...”

I was distraught. How could I have fallen so far? Thinking back to when it started, my brother and his friends were surrounding me. We were all joking and laughing. I was too scared to use yet, but my brother’s girlfriend offered me a shotgun. A shotgun is when someone puts the lit end of the joint or blunt in their mouth and blows the smoke into your face while you inhale. I was excited because in my mind it wasn’t technically smoking, was it??? The smoke filling my lungs felt hot, and it burned. The burn felt so good. I didn’t know I could enjoy pain so much. I had never coughed so hard in my life, but once that euphoric feeling hit me, I knew I was home.

I couldn’t get enough. I started out just smoking marijuana in the evening, but it began to control my life. I would go to school, but the whole time I was thinking about my next hit. It was like I needed more no matter what I did. I stopped staying after school for tutorials, and I quit hanging out with my friends. I started hanging out with my brother’s friends. They were all a bunch of the coolest people I had ever met, and they were always carrying.

Nick, a friend of my brothers, saw me struggling to balance school and my addiction. “Hey Sue, I got the best thing for you. It’ll help you stay awake, get more organized, and a perk is you’ll lose weight.” He chuckled and I didn’t get the joke. He pulled a tiny pipe out of his pocket and dropped a small white stone into the ball. Nick told me what to do next. “Inhale slow...” So, I did. The pleasure that burst from me was amazing. I knew at that moment I was invincible. I could do anything! I didn’t know it then, but I had found something that would change and even destroy my life.

“What was that?”

He laughed, “Meth.”

I was so excited; I couldn’t sit still. I was floored. How could I

have not known a drug was around that could make me feel so good? If I had known at that moment that my life would never be the same, I would've walked away, but I thought I was invincible.

Meth became my solution for everything. I'd have a bad day then I'd smoke. If I had a good day, I'd celebrate by smoking. When I couldn't sleep, I'd smoke more. Get the idea? No matter what I was doing, I found an excuse to smoke, but not just meth. I had picked up another disgusting habit: CIGARETTES!!! It covered the smell of the meth, and I believed that I could get higher if I smoked a cigarette after. I loved that delicious burn... I was hooked from the first drag.

I was always looking for my next score or hit. I wasn't working so I had very little money, but the little bit of money I had went to supporting my addictions. I was using drugs, people, situations, help, anything to keep me going. I was hooked!

At this point in my life, I was single, but I was only 15. I had been in active addiction for over a year. My morals were shot, and I started viewing life as one big party. Cue the boyfriends! My first boyfriend during my active addiction was so cool to me. He was tall, funny, charming, and always carrying. I had found my next connection. He was an addict just like me. Then I met his best friend, and I was enthralled. I couldn't help but think: man, this guy is sexy. Let me remind you that my morals were awful shaky now. I couldn't decide between these two boys, so I didn't. I chose both. They knew I was sleeping with both of them, but they didn't care. Fast forward, I'm 16, and 24 hours before I turned 17, I left home. I had run away from home because my mom wouldn't support my addiction. She expected me to quit, but how dare she. Didn't she know that my life wasn't complete until I discovered my drugs? I moved in with one of my boyfriends into his mom's house in December. A string of parties, horribly violent fights, and a string of toxic decisions happened. I was free. No adult supervision! I was on my own, and no one gave a shit about my addiction or how terrible my world was. All the men in my life cared about was if I was easy or not. Conscious or passed out, didn't matter. Just as long as I was compliant when the time came to be compliant. Months go by in that kind of status quo. Then I got violently ill. I had spent weeks sick. I kept thinking I was sick or had a parasite. I went to ER one night after my shift at Pizza Hut because I had been throwing up all day, and I felt terrible. I needed help.

The doctor took blood, made me pee in a cup, took X-rays, and the list goes on. I sat there for an eternity, throwing up, and fading in and out of sleep. Waiting for something. The doctor walked in with a social worker and a nurse. The doctor said those words. "I have good news. You're not sick, but you do have a parasite of sorts. It'll clear up in about 9 months. You tested positive for pregnancy." He looked at me while I was laughing but continued. "You have options. These two women will explain them to you." He handed me pamphlets, a prescription for antibiotics, I think, and a referral to an ob-gyn in town.

I was watching him slip through the curtain, but I was in shock. I think the nurse or the social worker was talking. I can't remember what they were saying. My mind was racing, but I was already formulating a plan. I had to protect it from me. "Where is the nearest live-in rehab facility?" I blurted out. I had to get clean. It wasn't this thing's fault I was a moron and addicted to drugs. I couldn't process the words *baby* or *pregnancy* yet. Yes, I was definitely in shock.

The social worker was smiling and handed me a stack of information. She told me she'd call the facility right away. I'd leave directly from the ER to go to the rehab. I tried arguing, but I agreed with her. If I walked out of that hospital, I'd go out to use again, and then I'd talk myself out of going to rehab. The next few days were, and still are, a blur. I don't know what happened except for lots of puking, shaking, and crying.

One day I woke up, and I felt like a haze had been removed. I could think and feel. "Good morning, Susan. There's a meeting starting in 10 minutes. You might consider going."

What else was I gonna do? I went, and I started out just listening to all these rules, and steps to be taken to stay sober, and then each person say their name. "Hi, I'm ... and I'm an addict." I watched people talking around the circle, and it was fast approaching my turn. Then it was my turn, but my mind was blank. I'd never spoken in a group setting without drugs, or at least not as far as I could remember. "I don't know what to say," I whispered and almost cried.

"What's your name sugar?"

"My name's Sue, and I guess I'm an addict."

"Hi, Sue. Welcome."

FOUR-LETTER WORDS

SELINA HUMPHREY

Love is just another four-letter word to me.
I hide my darkness well with a complacent smile, but
deep
down
further
still,
Tucked within the emptiness of the infinite space my soul embodies
is an essence of hope.
I keep that part bound and chained, thrice over, for if ever it sees
the
light
of
day—
Four-letter words are one in the same where I come from.
I can't say what sort of magick it takes to free this beast, but
few
have
been
triumphant.
For a moment, I believed in them as I believed in you, but
just as all magick fades when the sun rises,
I
remember
my
place.

NO HORIZON, NO FLOWERS, NO CLEMENCY

CHASE DI IULIO

The door will show you where to lay your head,
Something in here will make you full of fear,
This place that's cold and quiet – smells of lead,
There are only tiny sounds for one to hear.

A room all filled with men upon their knees,
The sweat that drips its way down to the floor,
Grovel and moan until they cannot breathe,
Short dreams are dreamt of life back on the shore.

The submarine now sits, it shall not move,
The voices screech from hell on down below,
The men know now they've got nothing to prove,
The few men left have fears that overflow.

Upon the sub the grave they all shall share,
It's the death of men who know they have dared.

THE CIVIL WAR IN MY BRAIN

AMB

CONTENT WARNING: EATING DISORDER

I grew up in a family where I was fully accepted for all that I am. I grew up in a society that doesn't accept anyone unless they look and act a certain way. This creates an indescribable inner turmoil in a young woman. What am I supposed to choose? Try to conform to the societal standards placed upon me, or accept myself the way my parents have taught me? I have always been a big girl in more ways than one. Although I know now that my mental health is more important than my physical appearance, I came to a rude awakening when the tug of war inside me was briefly won by society.

Let me start by saying I have played softball since I was five. Growing up around hundreds of girls that are all different shapes and sizes told my younger self that the way I looked had its ups and downs. Everyone's body type had ups and downs. Some were more powerful than others, some were faster than others, some were more flexible; whatever it was, we learned how to utilize our strengths and minimize our weaknesses. When softball became more serious to me, everything changed. The goal was to play softball in college, so athletes joined teams where everyone's goal was to play softball in college. Like minds, right? Well, where I am from, there aren't many options. There may be one or two teams that have the same mindset. So, I found one, little did I know that this team would bring me more heartache than achievement.

At a glance, this team was what I wanted. They had the connections, the coaching, the reputation, and the talent to get me where I wanted to go. Then I heard these words come from our coach's mouth and they changed my perspective on myself. He said, "Now that you're serious about playing college softball, you need to start acting like a college athlete. You need to start studying like a D1 athlete, training like a D1 athlete, and eating like a D1 athlete."

Now when I heard these words, something inside me clicked. I decided to take these words and run with them like a relay racer

passing the baton.

I had changed my eating habits on the spot and began going to the gym to lift every single day. The results came fast, and I became the most confident I had ever been when it came to my body image. Then I hit a plateau. I stopped seeing the results, but I wanted more. I started experimenting with my eating habits. I knew what I needed to eat in order to fuel my body with the energy required to execute the amount of activity I was doing each day. When I stopped seeing results, one thought popped into my mind: "If I don't eat before I work out, the only choice my body will have is to burn fat." So, I stopped eating before I went to the gym, and more results came. Then, I took it a step further and decided to see how long I could go without eating at all. I mean, how much energy did I really need to sit in class all day? It got to the point where if I took more than three bites of my food at the dinner table, I would become nauseous. I hated myself for it: I knew what I was doing was wrong. I knew that an athlete needs fuel in order to execute their jobs properly. I was stuck in a sick and twisted competition, but I was the opponent. Not only was I fighting with myself, but I was also fighting the opinions others felt compelled to share. Every day, people would tell me how good I looked, and how great all the work I was putting in had been. I don't blame them; there was no way they could've known about the civil war going on in my mind. There was still always this yearning inside me that hoped someone would ask if I was okay. Until one day someone did.

I was at practice for a different team on a day that I hadn't eaten anything. Everyone who knows the type of athlete I am, knows that I don't give up. I refuse to let myself do that. On this day, though, I did. I had to take a break from the drills we were doing because I didn't have enough energy to continue. I felt like I was going to black out. In and out of my head, I was in the midst of battle. There was this empty feeling inside me, gnawing at me, reminding me that I had done this to myself. Of course, my coach noticed that this was out of character for me. After practice he pulled me aside to ask what happened. I told him that I didn't know why but I had no energy. So he asked, "Have you been sleeping?" and I replied with the truth, "Yes."

Then he asked, "Have you been drinking enough water?"

Again the truth, "I think so."

Next was the question that I dreaded to hear, "Have you been eating?"

I didn't expect to feel so embarrassed and relieved at the same time. Once more I told him the truth, hesitantly, I replied with the simple two letter word, "No," and I explained to him the reasoning behind my poor decisions.

Then he told me something that I will never forget. He said, "I would rather have you be you, than have you die or get hurt because of what someone else said you should be." The string of words he said to me that day snapped me out of the path I was winding towards. It was that day that I realized how much my body does for me and how cruel I have been to it. Not only did I deprive it of the nutrients it deserved, I did so knowingly and willingly.

I decided from that day on, my mental health was worth more to me than my physical appearance. I am not going to say that my battle with food is over, or act like I don't struggle with it every day. I am a veteran of this war who has PTSD. I will say that I never want to feel the way I felt that day ever again. I thank my lucky stars every day that someone cared enough to notice and ask. I was heading down a very dark path and I will never be able to repay that coach for being the one to pull me out of the trenches. Sometimes my mind is my own worst enemy, but it is important for me to remember that I am not a lone soldier in the civil war of my brain.

DEAR CASHIERS,

MIRANDA REESE

THIRD PLACE CREATIVE NONFICTION

It has been almost a year since I escaped the clutches of retail work, but I still think of you often. Mostly when I am standing in line at the self-checkout, waiting on an elderly man who can't figure out that you have to set the bananas down for the machine to weigh them. Most people don't see it, but I know you are truly the backbone of society.

When I still worked at Walmart, my friends and relatives who worked comfortable desk jobs would get mad at me for canceling plans because I was too tired to move. They'd tell me, "Well, I'm tired too—mentally tired," As if all I had been doing for 8 hours was watching things roll down a conveyor belt. Most people wouldn't last one day as a front-end cashier. In fact, about 60% of the new hires I trained walked off the job within the first week because they could not take it—I couldn't take it either, but I didn't have the courage to walk off.

Cashiering is physical, mental, and emotional labor. It is lifting, pushing, moving, and pivoting all day long, getting down on your knees because a customer doesn't want to move something from the bottom of their cart, and manhandling a 50 lb. bag of dog food because the manufacturer didn't want the bar code to interfere with the graphic design of the packaging, so they stuck it in on the bottom of the fucking bag. It is memorizing hundreds of 4-digit codes and figuring out how to troubleshoot the keypad when it stops reading cards. It's fielding complaints, comments, and concerns while answering questions about departments you haven't set eyes on in months. It's standing on a naked concrete floor until your feet hurt so bad that you're not sure you're going to make it to your car at the end of your shift. And you're doing it all as fast as you possibly can.

I kept that job at Walmart for three years and walked out in the fall of 2020. I had another retail job off and on for a year before I lucked out and landed a position in my field of study. I'm getting paid three dollars an hour more for a fraction of the work I did as a

cashier. Not only that, but I took up the training and excelled at my work much faster than any of my peers, and I think the main reason is my skill with a register. My quick fingers have never left me. I can polish off a stack of data entries in no time flat and multi-task like nobody's business. My boss constantly comments on what a hard worker I am, and truthfully, I feel a little guilty because I don't feel like I'm doing that much. I am a stronger professional than I ever thought I'd be, and I attribute most of that growth to that piece of shit job at Walmart.

However, I don't want to give anyone the impression that I think the pain and humiliation I went through were anywhere near worth it to get a couple steps ahead in a better-paying position. Trauma from that job still bubbles out of me. I'll catch a specific shape of headlights in my rearview mirror, and it'll remind me of the man who followed me all the way back home after waiting in the parking lot for 2 hours for me to get off work. Unfortunately, that's not nearly the worst thing I can remember. A customer tried to put his hands around my throat because he thought I stole his shopping cart. My managers chose not to ban him from the store, and I had to see my attacker for three months until he attacked another customer and got arrested. Another time, somebody held my store up with a gun, and the general manager made the call not to close the store because we were already behind in our quarterly sales. No suspect was ever arrested. When I think about who I was back then, I don't recognize that person. For three years, that job systematically killed my joy, self-esteem, and creativity. I don't have any pictures of myself from that period, no writing, no art, nothing. Sometimes, it feels like I didn't exist at all. If I could do it all over again, I would tell that recruiter right where he could stick that job application.

In closing, I just want you to know how hard you work. I want you to know you are doing a good job and you are worthy of respect, dignity, and a stool, so you can sit down if you feel like it. No matter how your boss makes you feel, you are not expendable. You are highly skilled and broadly specialized, and any hiring manager worth his mustard should pounce if they see several years of cashiering experience on your resume. I hope one day you can feel your true worth, whether in the form of a different job or better treatment at your current one.

Peace and Love Always,
Miranda

THAT ONE, *DIVINE AWAKENED*

SELINA HUMPHREY

I am She, *that One you know and speak about.*
I am Her, *head low and Hiding.*
She is Me, *face forward, Smiling.*
We are We, *born to Reign.*
The Other, *put in Chains.*
Smothered, *Silenced into Doubt.*
Half chosen, *when Convenience calls.*
Left, *grasping towards bleeding Walls.*

Taken, *far from Innocence.*
To the Stake, *prepped for Gasoline.*
To the Blade, *head bowed for Guillotine.*
To the Flame, *a Phoenix rising.*
To the Shame, *guilt Free and Dying.*
To the Hill, *Marching ever on.*
To the Martyred, *Memorialized for not.*
Denied, *journey's End yet sought.*

I am Symbol, *that One worn upon your Chest.*
I am Shield, *bearing Armor, Steel.*
You are Me, *put Here to feel.*
We are Free, *Condemned no more.*
The Paradox, *flowing ashore.*
Connected, *to Collective whole.*
Fully yoked, *bound by unspoken Code.*
Disconnected, *blind Story still untold.*

Enlighten, *She and We and Them.*
To the Purpose, *higher calling Spoken.*
To the Will, *no longer Beaten, Broken.*
To the Reason, *love and love and love.*
To the Treason, *pressing down above.*
To the Blame, *misplaced, believed, and passed.*
To the Blameless, *I am not, are You?*
Afraid, *no more, the Chosen few.*

E.N.D.

NIKY M

FIRST PLACE POETRY

Everything.

There's so much and yet nothing at all. It's total chaos, the hellscape of the mind. Lists lists lists. Don't forget to go to the grocery store, you have your second job today, feed the snake on Sunday. Deadlines – proposal due in September, chapter due in October. Wait, go back. Donations end August 25th, retreat 26th, students come back 28th. Frantic. Chaos. Am I a good friend? A good mother? Should I do more? Grief. You're not doing enough. Despair. You're doing too much! Frustration. There's that twist in the gut, lump in the throat again...everything is fine... but that doesn't stop the thoughts – don't forget your appointment tonight, pet sitting, when can you clean upstairs for your next guest this week? Missy needs a bath. Clean the dishes, clean the cat feeders, mow the lawn. So much to remember, so much to DO. It's so hot outside. It's too cold inside. Find time to relax. Review the papers, submit emails, respond to texts, check up on people, rewrite, START writing. So many things – **everything**.

Nothing.

As with all feelings and emotions, especially those that you sit with, there comes a time when it all stops. It's quiet. You're here, you're there, you're actually nowhere at all. This may be the most difficult moment. The words start to quiet, slip away, fade and disappear. There is something to say, but what? There was a thought, but it's... gone? The vast emptiness. Darkness. Almost comforting to sit here, just a little while and be. Breathe. Close your eyes. Know "this too shall pass." The universe has you, they got you, they always have and always will. Wait. What is that feeling? Oh, yes, crying... again. Perhaps there is something here or maybe it's just more release so that there is – **nothing**.

Done.

