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UCR Honors Capstones 2018-2019

Title

Duality: A Non-Artists Approach to Art

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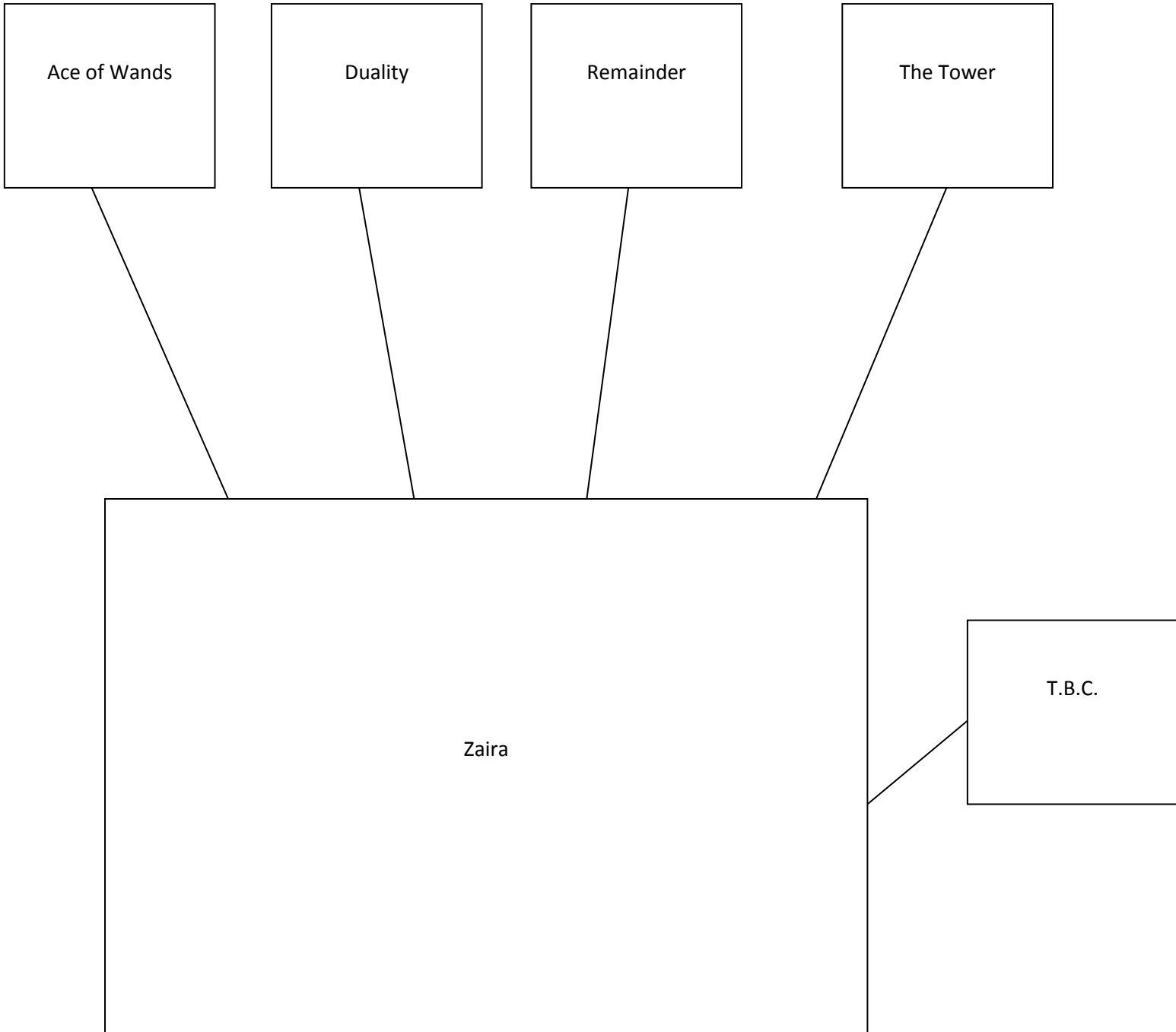
Abstract

Acknowledgments

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgments.....	iii

Mind Map



Introduction: Why art?

While some people might start by stating that their capstone project was carefully thought out and executed I won't even try to do that. For me, it was just a happy coincidence. As a Psychology student I originally began to work in my respective field on a Psychobiography of my favorite musician: Steven Wilson. Not only do I believe his music is beautifully composed, but the themes and ideas he shares have always struck a chord with me (No pun intended).

As I was studying abroad in Germany, I focused all my research towards this project. After coming back, I spent a whole quarter being sick and could not continue to properly research and work. Eventually, the Psychobiography ended up not only being unfeasible, but also not interesting anymore. I knew I wanted to say something, but I was not sure what, or how to accomplish it. With help of my Honors Counselor, I turned to the Creative Writing Department at UCR for help and (after much stumbling around) found my faculty-mentor Dr. Nalo Hopkinson at the start of this calendar year.

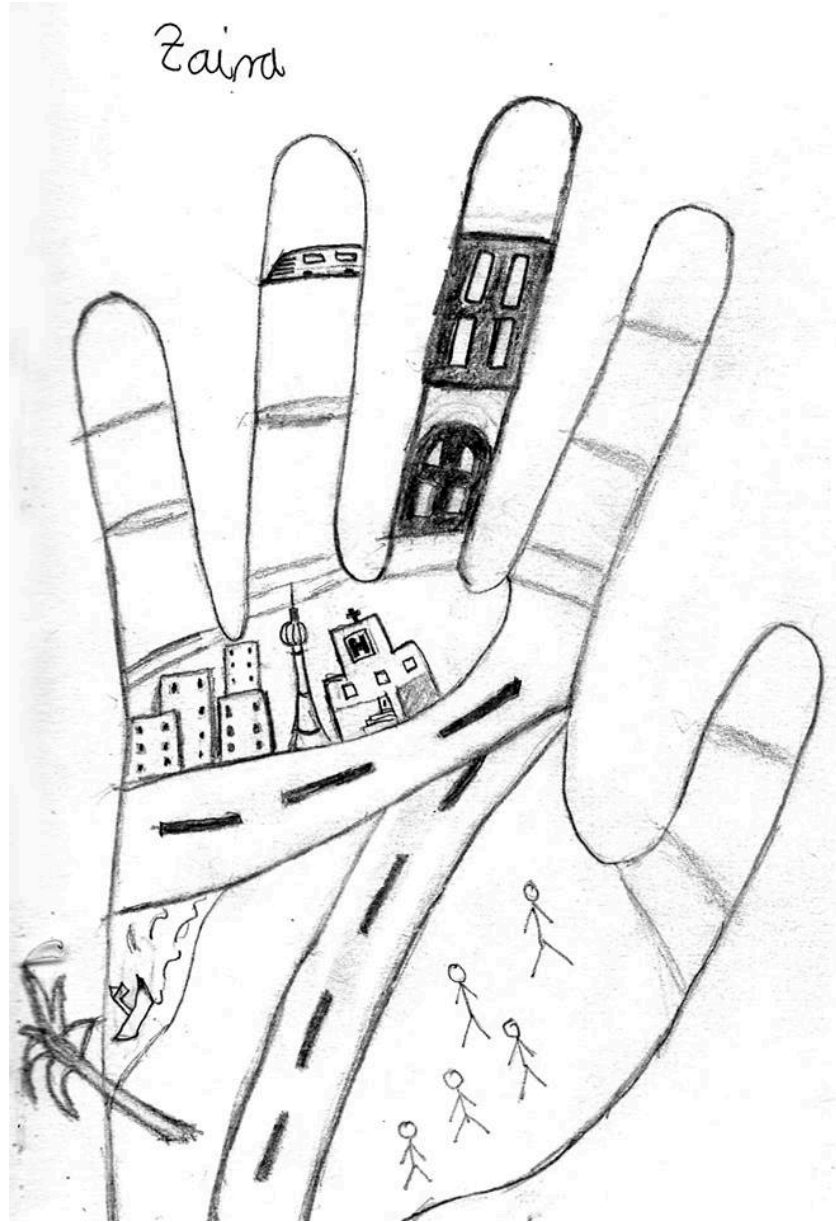
Dr. Hopkinson not only liked my ideas, but was willing to work with me even though I had no experience in creative writing whatsoever. I felt somewhat safe in thinking that I have always had a bit of a way with words, but my first attempts at short stories were frustrating and bland. At the same time, I seemed to have a hard time coming up with ideas. Before moving to the United States five years ago I was a musician for a couple of years in El Salvador, and continued studying music as I arrived here for the first couple of years. Nonetheless, this type of creative thinking did not come as easily as music.

Everything changed in February, as I visited an exhibition at UCR Arts called "Mundos Alternos: Art and Science Fiction in the Americas", which focused on Latino art and an imagination of alternate worlds and perspectives on history in a variety of disciplines ranging

from photography to sculptures. I was enthralled by the exhibition and found myself strangely connected to my Hispanic roots and a sense of Latinism in me and threw caution to the wind by deciding to do an artistic project. On one of our meetings with Prof. Hopkinson, she directed me to the works of Lynda Barry and her book Syllabus, in which she talks about her experience teaching a course at the University of Wisconsin-Madison focusing on art through a variety of disciplines (such as writing, drawing, sculpting, etc.) for non-artistic students. Her belief that anyone can be (and also effectively is) an artist regardless of their background caught my attention.

Suddenly, I was sure that, not only I wanted to tell my own story, but also that I wanted to do it in an artistic way. As such, I set out to draw for the first time in at least 15 years. The following is a very small collection of drawings serving as a story-telling device and their respective influences, as well as how they relate to my life experiences.

Zaira



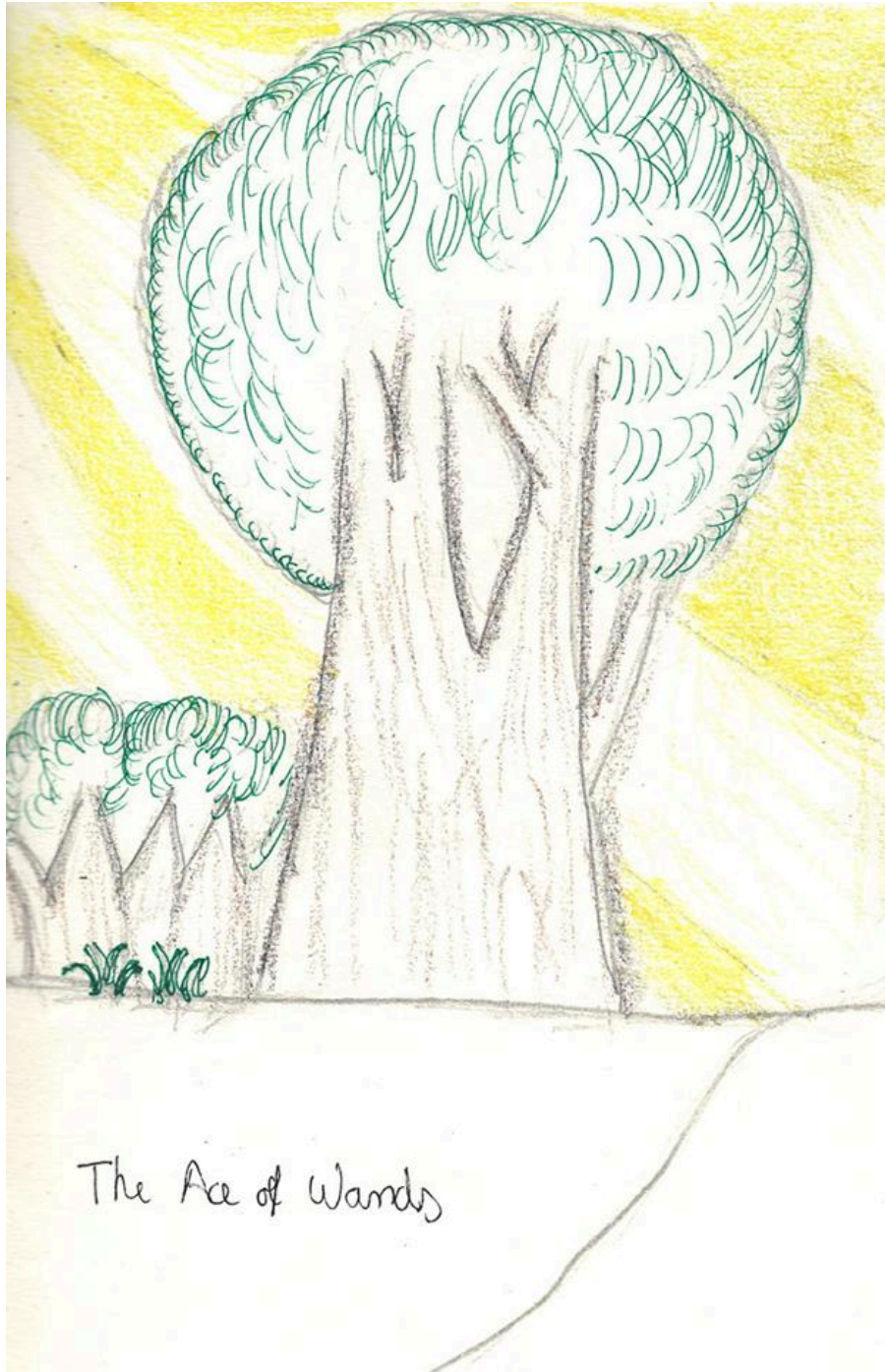
"As this wave from memories flows in, the city soaks it up like a sponge and expands. A description of Zaira as it is today should contain all Zaira's past. The city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand..."

Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972)

This drawing was inspired by the city of Zaira, contained in the book *Invisible Cities*, by Italo Calvino. In this book, emperor Kublai Khan and the traveler Marco Polo have a dialogue, in which Marco Polo tells the emperor about the cities that his empire contains. As the book progresses, the cities become more and more surreal. At some point, Marco Polo confesses that the cities are not real. While initially angered, the emperor eventually does not mind, as he likes listening to Marco Polo's descriptions. In reality, the cities are all meditations on different aspects of the human experience, such as death, memories, and fear, but also happiness, and love (among others). The book ends with an advice on how to deal with the "Inferno of the living" by either accepting the inferno, or seek and recognize what is not part of the inferno to make it last.

While the graphical portrayal of Zaira as a hand is not unheard of, I have tried to portray it more as a modern city, with certain elements from my past, such as the Fernsehturm in Berlin, or windows similar to the ones that my room in El Salvador had. All the other drawings are also connected to this one and represents each of Zaira's fingers trying to portray some of my life experiences and thoughts. I believe, that Benjamin (just like Zaira, or any other person) can't just be described by simple physical descriptions. To really know a person, one must understand their past, background, and other historical factors, all of which can be "seen" in a person by the way they behave in the world.

The Ace of Wands



“Every new beginning comes from some other’s beginnings end.”

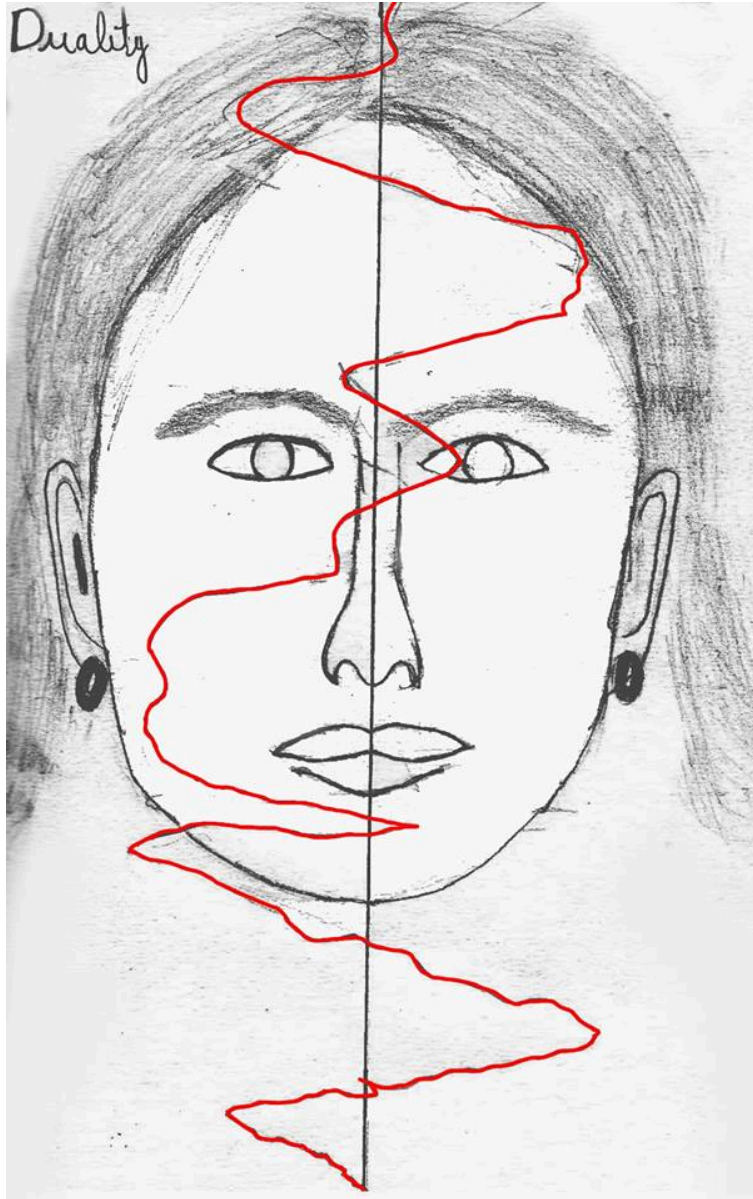
Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Roman Philosopher 4 BC – AD 65)

At times when I was not sure how to clear my “brain fog” and continue with my capstone, Dr. Hopkinson directed me to resources outside my comfort zone for ideas. One of them was the Afro-Brazilian Tarot, which inspired this drawing as a depiction of the Ace of Wands card and is usually attributed to new beginnings. While commonly used for divination, the Tarot can also be used as story-telling device in a non-esoteric way. While the drawing was not particularly complicated to complete, I did have issues with the overall mood it portrays, as I am much more comfortable with darker themes, as well as a darker palette of colors.

I strongly associate this drawing with my move to the United States in 2013 after my father’s death in 2011 with whom I lived in El Salvador (My mother had been living in the US since 2002). While the reasons for my move were not the happiest, the future at the time of my relocation was very bright and promising. The tree symbolizes the continuous growth we experience in life and our gradual transformations as a person. I grew a lot as a person over those two years and learned to cope not only with loss, but also with my fears stemming from the car accident that killed my father and from which I came out completely unscathed and walking. After that dark period in my life, the move was just the new beginning that I needed.

At the same time, I knew that I was going to be able to continue my journey in music after having been a musician in El Salvador for two years. I started studying music at San Bernardino Valley College in Summer 2017 and received private bass guitar lessons for two years and played in a couple of bands of varying genres of music.

Duality



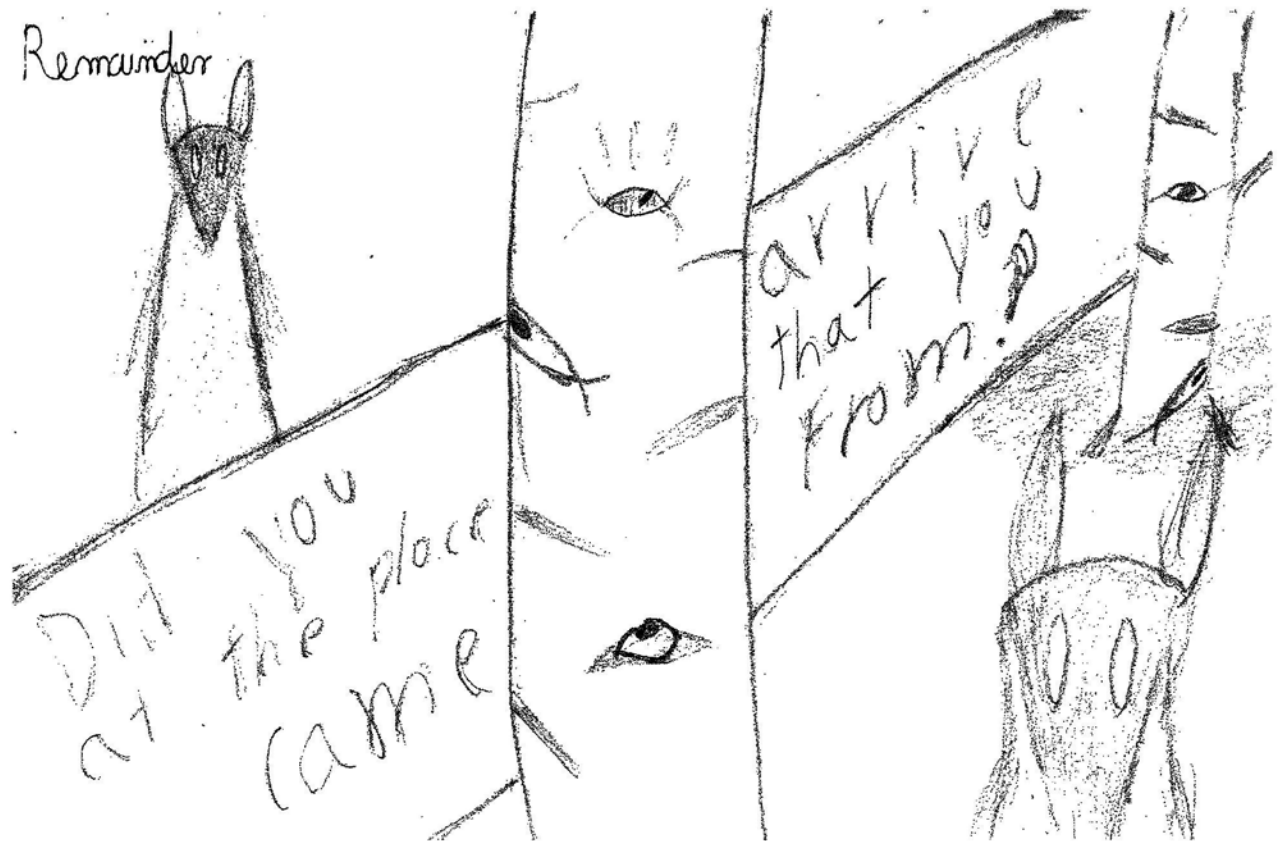
“Generally, when I’m tired or sad, I struggle not to think that ‘everything is doomed’.
Conversely, when I am okay, the switch flips so fast, and for reasons that are perplexing, I find myself investing considerable amounts of energy into simply staying afloat and trying to see a bigger picture”

Devin Townsend, *Only Half There* (2016)

Music has always played a huge part in my life. One of my favorite musicians is called Devin Townsend. While he's most known for being the singer and lead guitarist of the extreme metal band Strapping Young Lad, his various solo projects are musically diverse, ranging from progressive country to ambient. At the same time, he has bipolar disorder, and I identify strongly with him, as I am myself diagnosed with Cyclothymia, which is a mild type of bipolar disorder, characterized by strong mood swings ranging from hypomania to depression on a regular basis. His book "Only Half There" is an autobiography and also a window into his mind and creative processes. The drawing is my own self-portrait, but is crossed by a vertical black line representing the center of the mood spectrum, and a red line representing the seemingly chaotic nature of my mood swings. This was also the hardest drawing to do for someone whose previous artistic efforts consisted of stick figures in elementary school.

I have been suffering from mood disorders since I was twelve years old following my parents very tumultuous divorce. While originally just depressive, the shock of the accident and my father's death brought upon a generalized anxiety disorder and PTSD. I started being treated in 2013 and was officially diagnosed with cyclothymic disorder. While I am fully functional in life, the quote under the drawing most accurately depicts the way cyclothymic disorder feels at times. Being in treatment, in addition to exposure to a variety of classes during my freshman and sophomore year of community college made me increasingly interested in mental health, finally completing the change to Psychology when I transferred to UCR in 2015. Medical school is now in my plans as well, after having completed the Life Sciences Core and gotten my EMT certification, and having done some medical volunteering in the last years.

Remainder



“Scintilla falling behind

Did you arrive at the place that you came from?

A cultivator of dread

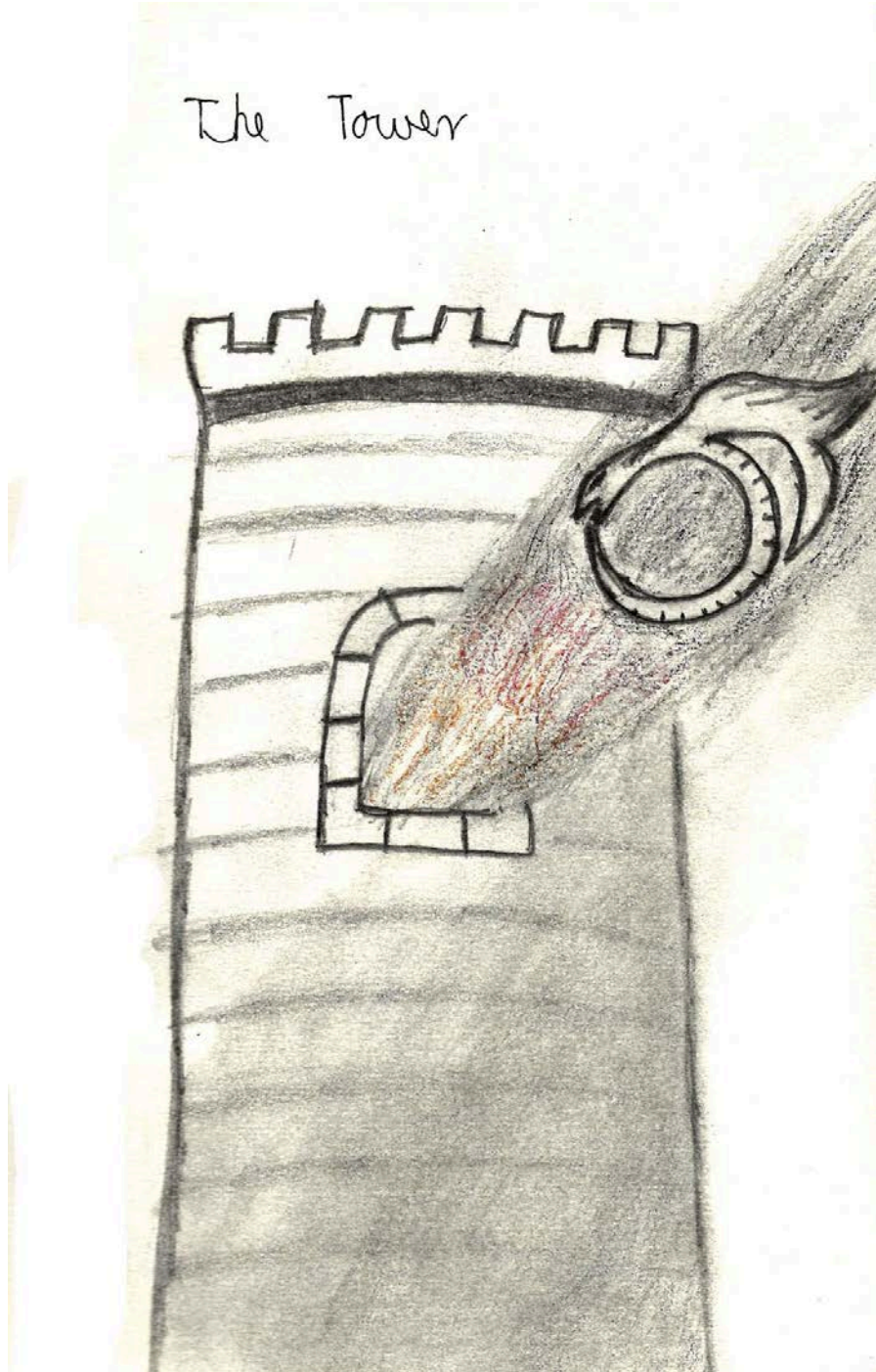
The paranoia took root in your cold heart”

Steven Wilson, Remainder The Black Dog. From the album Grace for Drowning (2011)

Another drawing inspired by a musician. Though mostly known for his work as the leader of the Progressive Rock band Porcupine Tree, he is a very prolific musician, composer, multi-instrumentalist, and audio engineer. He plays a central part in around seven different musical projects and has produced and remastered countless of albums for a variety of musician. Very heavily influenced by a range of artists such as Prince, ABBA, Donna Summer, Pink Floyd, and some more obscure musicians, his music is extremely diverse, yet characterized by a sense of nostalgia and finding beauty in the darkest subjects of human nature.

The drawing is inspired by a song called “Remainder The Black Dog”, which seems to relate to a prevailing sense of dread or anguish that is felt by people suffering from mood disorders such as depression or anxiety. On a day I was feeling particularly anxious due to my hypomania I was walking near the Rivera Library and noticed that someone had carved eyes on the trees surrounding the Bell Tower and could not shake the feeling of being closely observed by them. The phrase “Did you arrive at the place that you came from?” (found in the song’s lyrics) seemed only fitting to the sense of circularity experienced due to the Cyclothymia due to the mood swings, as well as the overall sense of anxiety and slight paranoia it induces when over-stimulated.

The Tower



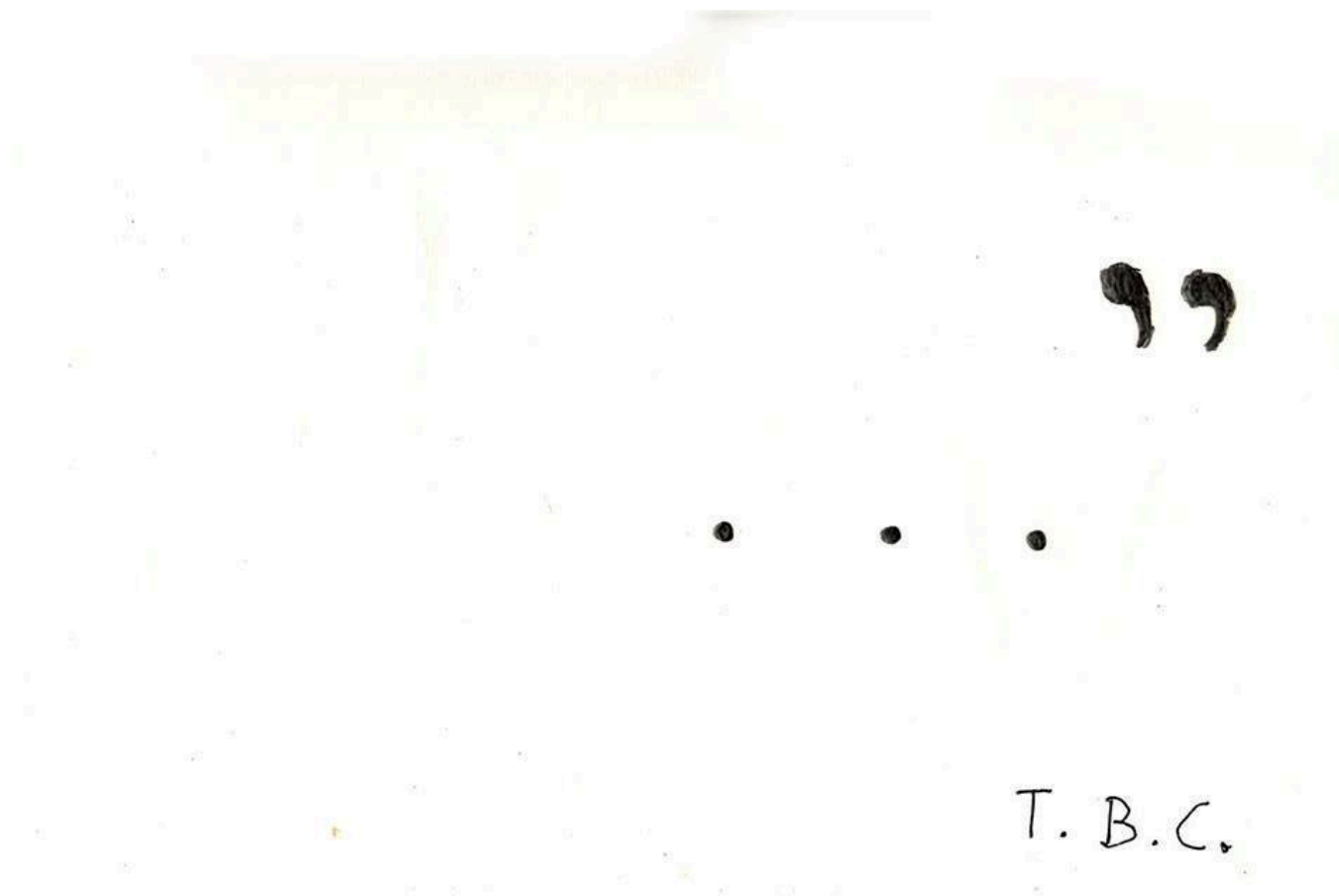
“Life is a circle. The end of one journey is the beginning of the next.”

Joseph M. Marshall III, *The Journey of Crazy Horse: A Lakota History*

Inspired by the Afro-Brazilian Tarot as well, The Tower is my representation of The Tower card in the Tarot deck. During one of our talks, Dr. Hopkinson explained to me that most people are afraid of The Death card in the deck, but it is actually The Tower, which holds the title of the most dangerous card in the deck. While I do not believe in the esoteric meaning attributed to the tarot cards, I did find The Tower card to be very impacting. While mostly attributed to disastrous consequences, I also found its other meaning quite intriguing. Destruction does not necessarily mean the end of things, but could also mean a dramatic change in one's life and a warning to be prepared to deal with the consequences of change. This is my favorite drawing of all the ones present in the capstone, as I worked on the tower's shading by simple trial and error. Though the tower is burning, an uroboros can be seen in the smoke, which symbolizes that life goes on and every ending is also a beginning.

This drawing was particularly meaningful for me as my time as an Undergrad student came to an end. While my cyclothymic disorder is completely under control by both therapy and medication I am very wary of the end of this life stage, as the disorder seems to respond very strongly to environmental factors. I will be taking a gap year before applying to Medical School to strengthen my application and volunteer in the Inland Empire (hopefully through an AmeriCorps Program), as well as excel in the MCAT. Despite any difficulties I may face though, I feel strongly motivated as I ended my time at UCR with a great GPA and having grown as a person immensely since moving to the US five years ago.

T.B.C.



“Don’t be afraid to die
Don’t be afraid to be alive
Don’t be afraid to die
Don’t be afraid to be alive
Don’t be afraid.”

Steven Wilson, Song of Unborn. From the album To The Bone (2017)

The last drawing was not really inspired by anything. After drawing The Tower, I felt empty, as I realized that this journey that started in January was coming to an end. I was trying to come up with a drawing symbolizing that everything is nothing but the start of my journey and life goes on. Finally, I found that the most fitting way to portray this was three single dots. At the same time, the title “T.B.C.” just stands for To Be Continued.

While the drawing is the most uninspired of them all, it has a very special meaning for me that was further increased by connecting it to “Song of Unborn” by Steven Wilson, in which he sings to an unborn child and tells him that, though the world is a very dark place, he should not be afraid to live, as there is beauty even in darkness and life is special no matter what one’s conditions might be.

This drawing is meant as a reminder to myself that I need to work on myself in the following gap year and grow as a person to be ready to apply for Medical School during the 2019 application cycle and hopefully be able to serve as a mental health professional in the Inland Empire region and help the place that has welcomed me so warmly in the last five years and that I proudly and officially call home now that I am a US Citizen. At the same time, I will continue down this artistic path for myself with the intention of improving my skills with time, as this capstone project has allowed me to understand myself and others around me greatly. My story is just beginning and I intend to continue adding more experiences and be myself throughout the whole way.

While this capstone only provides a slight glimpse into my person, I hope that anyone who reads this can say that they know a bit more about myself after reading it (despite my still-improving drawing and story-telling skills).