

Written Submission

Title: *The River I Carry Inside Me*

Author: Zakaria Tourabi

Word Count: ~682 words

There are days when I feel like my body is a country with too many borders. Some were drawn before I learned my own name. Some carved by silence. Some traced by other people's expectations of who I should become. In those days, I walk carefully—afraid of crossing into parts of myself that were once forbidden.

And yet, something keeps calling me forward.

Not loudly.

More like a hum rising from the bones, a vibration under the skin, a soft pulse saying, "*Move. There is more in you than you've been taught to hold.*"

My collage, *Trouver des Raisons d'Accepter*, began as an answer to that hum. I didn't sketch a plan. I didn't arrange a composition. I simply gathered pieces of myself as if I were salvaging materials after a storm—photographs where I tried to camouflage my longing, handwriting that betrayed truths I hid even from myself, gestures made by a body negotiating its own permission to exist.

I laid them on the page like offerings.

Only later did I realize I was building a kind of internal democracy. A place where the versions of me I had exiled—

the boy who tiptoed through Casablanca with too-large dreams,

the teenager who learned that shrinking made other people more comfortable,

the young African artist who practiced invisibility as a survival skill,

the emerging self who refuses to stay small—

could gather and vote on the future of my becoming.

Dr. King's words—"*We cannot walk alone... we shall always march ahead... we cannot turn back*"—feel less like a command and more like a prophecy fulfilled in my own body. I cannot walk alone because I am never alone. Even when the world around me did not make room, there were voices inside me marching long before I was brave enough to follow.

And they march still.

They march when I hesitate before making a mark on the page.
 They march when I allow my voice to shake instead of disappear.
 They march when I laugh too loudly in a room that once demanded my quiet.
 They march each time I choose to step into visibility, even when the echo of old fears tries to call me back.

At Tufts, I have discovered that community is not simply a cluster of people—it is a choreography of courage. Someone steps forward, and suddenly you find the strength to step too. Someone asks you a question that cuts straight through the script you’ve been performing, and suddenly you are not reciting anymore; you are living.

This is what “not walking alone” means to me now:
 being accompanied by the past versions of myself,
 being held by the present ones,
 being witnessed by those who see the parts I haven’t yet realized I am allowed to claim.

Dr. King’s image of justice “rolling down like waters, and righteousness like a mighty stream” has stayed with me because water is both gentle and relentless. It whispers and crashes. It heals and reshapes. It wears down mountains not by force alone but by returning again and again with unwavering devotion.

The justice I seek does not march with banners. It does not speak from the podium. It flows inside me like water—slow, steady, and insistent. It fills the cracks I tried to hide, floods the rooms where shame once lived, softens the stone I pressed into my own chest. And it tells me, with the patience of a river that has seen centuries: *Keep moving. You were never meant to be a drought.*

My collage is a map of that movement. A visual testament to the fact that I am not walking alone, not turning back, not shrinking into an old silhouette. I am learning to let my inner landscape flood with truth. I am learning to carry every voice I contain without apology. I am learning to build a body-wide democracy where each version of me has a place at the table.

And somewhere in that unfolding, I understand what Dr. King knew:
 Liberation is not a moment.
 It is direction.

And I am walking.

Works Cited

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "*I Have a Dream.*" 28 Aug. 1963. Copyright © 1963 by Martin Luther King, Jr. [Excerpt provided in the Tufts University MLK Student Voices Award prompt.](#)