

Survivors to Superheroes Presents

Songs of Survival



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Cover Art by Emma Cromwell

CW: Rape

Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

What a journey publishing this journal has been, one that started about four and a half years ago. I woke up in the middle of the night, shirt drenched with sweat. A new bump, which would shortly turn into a bruise, was swelling on my forearm from not being able to escape my own violent thrashing around. Flashbacks and nightmares had become a normal part of my life. I distinctly remember looking up at the outline of the ceiling fan, illuminated by the television that had become a nighttime staple in the aftermath of violence. I couldn't stop the tears, remembering what it was like to look up at that same fan while the body of another crushed my own.

My mom heard me crying and came into my room, carrying pencils and paper. We had developed a routine to calm me down where we would draw *Nightmares Be Gone* bunnies to hang on my wall every time I had a bad night. That night, as we drew, I shared how hard it was to hold and sit with the memories and aftermath of violent assaults that controlled my life. I was not yet at a point where I was able to share details with other people, including my family, and though I was journaling (in a fairly unhelpful way), I needed more. The two of us had already been dreaming up the organization that is now Survivors to Superheroes, and that night was the birth of this Literary Journal, *Songs of Survival*.

Initially, we wanted a way for young survivors, like myself, to share our stories. Over time, it became clear that the best way to do this was through publishing our own mission-based literary journal. We wanted the platform to be safe, accessible, and easy for survivors to have their authentic voices heard. So often, survivors of sexual violence, in particular young survivors, are filtered and silenced. Our goal was to combat this horrific reality, and the work that you will encounter over the upcoming pages does just that.

Getting to work with these fantastic poets, authors, and artists has left me grateful and honored. I am truly in awe of the bravery that I have encountered while putting this journal together, alongside my incredible team. Sharing your story is a scary and vulnerable act, and we at Survivors to Superheroes have worked hard to put together a journal that honors this reality, and holds the stories of our contributors with integrity. Thank you so much to those of you who have contributed work to the first

edition of *Songs of Survival*. Your voices will help other survivors and their loved ones feel less alone, and hopefully become more willing to share their own stories in ways that are safe, empowering, and healing.

You may notice a few things that differentiate *Songs of Survival* from other literary journals. First, please note that we have put content warnings at the tops of pages that we feel need them. Our goal is to provide our readers with the most comfortable reading experience possible, even though this topic can be triggering, activating, or simply hard to grapple with. That being said, it is important to remember that all of these pieces, even those that don't have content warnings on them, still have the potential to be triggering. Make sure to take care of yourself and take breaks while reading!

Second, this is very much the journal that I needed when I was younger, feeling lonely and lost while crying that night in my bedroom. I can say with certainty that it is also the outlet that my mother needed, when she felt overwhelmed with grief over being the parent of a survivor. This is a pattern that I have seen while working with members of the Survivors team as well. Since this journal was founded out of such a personal need, we decided as a team to try and accept as many submissions as possible, including submissions from members of our own team. This way we are truly giving survivors and their loved ones the ability to share their voices no matter who they are.

I myself hope to one day share my poetry in *Songs of Survival*, alongside the other people who have been affected by this epidemic, so I will no longer have to hold my story alone. In that way, this journal is a gift to myself and to all of the survivors who have been searching for a place to share our stories, something that we all deserve.

Last, although this edition of *Songs of Survival* is focused around survival, we at Survivors to Superheroes have made a conscious effort to make it clear that survival can look like anything. We accept stories and art about survival, no matter where the survivor or loved one is in their own journey. Survival may look like endless therapy sessions, cooking comfort food, relapsing, journaling, celebrating after the completion of a trial, or even just taking a walk in the woods on a sunny day. Although this may go against what is stereotypically thought of when you hear the term survival, this provides a realistic picture of what recovery and survival actually looks like. This has been a very important point that we kept returning to while accepting submissions and putting together the journal as a whole

The power of words and art is great, and it is my hope that as you read, you really take the time to contemplate and sit with the messages and stories being gifted to all of us in this work. Please share *Songs of Survival* with family, friends, and on social media so that we can continue to support all of the brave individuals who shared pieces of their souls and stories with us. We hope that you will find our journal engaging, meaningful, and helpful to you in your own journeys.

With much gratitude and love,
Julia Tortorello-Allen

President of Survivors to Superheroes
Editor in Chief of *Songs of Survival*

CW: sexual abuse, pedophilia, and incest

My Body at Sixty

When I was six years old,
I used to play with wide-eyed dolls and rosaries,
The bathroom smelled of mold,
I'd have to spend the night at Rosalie's.

We slept in the same bed,
She taught me,
All the pleasures she could feel,
She made a feather, ecstasy.
When I asked her where she'd learn that,
She told quietly to never tell,
What she had learned from uncle Matt.

When I was sixteen,
I pretended not to hear.
Words that numbed my ears,
Pulled at my sleeves,
And unclothed me with a sneer.

Instead, I skipped my meals,
Forgot to feel,
And burst in bouts of tears,
Beneath the shower water,
Until my skin began to peel.

When I was seven,
I learned how to make myself feel good alone.
At first ashamed and confused,
Like a dog wearing a cone.

When I was seventeen,
I tried to let another make me feel,
He didn't do the very best of jobs,
But his intentions, they were real.

When I was four years old,
I attained a different tongue.
My parents promised me I'd learn to speak,
But my silence keeps me young.

When I was just fourteen,
A man's hands made me wrung.
He brought me misery,
Contorted my body.
And from that dance my sickness sprung.

When I am sixty,
I will see myself,
In a mirror in my
home, I will not
recognize,
The bends and bricks,
That base my humble
form.

By Anonymous

chocolate

1.

How is it that assault
could be so soft
taste so sweet?

Bits of chocolate still clinging to my tongue
sugar in the pressing together of lips
lips that were saying

No.
Please,
Stop.
and then nothing at all

eventually "no" turned into a lump in my throat
and I resigned to the bittersweet chocolate
still coating my tongue

I tasted the chocolate
and I felt the hands on my skin
and I felt sick with a stomach full of sweets

I looked at the ceiling
and I tasted chocolate and
I didn't move and

I tasted chocolate.
And I kept tasting chocolate and I tried not to taste anything else

until finally I just tasted nothing but
my empty mouth,
empty promises from an early Valentine's evening.

I took my stuffed dog that wore a heart around its neck that said "I love you,"
and the rest of my box of chocolates that you bought for me from CVS

My dad is here to pick me up.
I'll see you in honors chemistry.

2.

He developed a taste for chocolate.

3.

I slipped my secret

into your hand, shaking

you tucked it behind your ear

and vowed your condemnation

promised a confrontation

You got me out

I thought. but

you still ate from his hand

the very same that

you had threatened to crush

bone

by

stinking

bone

after it had crushed my windpipe

stifling the words that only you could know and

stop.

where did my secret go?

it is no longer behind your ear.

It's in his hand.

He slips it under your belt.

You ask him to.

The darkness of your basement

binds you to each other

with a sinew wrought from what was once my confession

but it swallows me whole and

spits me right back into his hand.

4.

it's so dark.

where did you go?

where did everyone go?

By Sandy Chilson

I've found that the only way that I can truly express my feelings is to write them down. I turn to poetry to express things that I cannot convey in conventional speech or prose. Sharing this poem has given me back my voice that was taken from me and has helped me to take ownership of my story and all that comes with it.

How to Throw a Punch

Originally published on the Survivors to Superheroes website

A few weeks ago, I was scrolling through Twitter and I stumbled upon a news article about a recent sexual assault case. I read the article and then, against my better judgement, immediately went to go look through the replies to the original tweet.

I was pleasantly surprised to find that nearly all the replies were full of empathy and compassion for the survivor, but there was one comment from a man that made me pause.

Though I don't remember the exact wording, the general gist was this: "What a horrifying story. This is why I always buy women weapons for Christmas".

At first, I found myself laughing at the absurdity of the visual. "Hope you enjoy the AK-47, honey! Thought it would go great with the machete I got you last year." "Aw man, Uncle Pete, ANOTHER assault rifle? You shouldn't have!"

The initial humor soon wore off, though, and I was left with a lingering feeling that I'm still struggling to categorize. Frustration? Sadness? Fatigue? Some fun combination of all three? The best word I could use to describe it would be a vague "discomfort".

It's uncomfortable to hear people (usually men) talk about self-defense or arming oneself as a catch-all "rape preventer". The worst part is that it usually comes from a good place. They understand that sexual violence is wrong, they don't want it to happen, and they're looking for a way to stop it. But the way they hope to do that is by putting all of the onus on the victim--the rape is inevitable, an unpreventable part of the world that we must simply protect ourselves against.

It's like this: when I was thirteen, my dad taught me how to throw a punch.

We'd just watched a frightening news story about a sexual assault case in our area. The details of the case are long gone from my memory, leaving only the clenching sensation of anger and fear. The survivor was a young woman, I remember that at least.

The story really unsettled my dad. I don't have kids, so I can't say I've experienced the feelings of fear and powerlessness parents get over their children's safety, but then and there, I could imagine it. So he did the only thing he felt he could do in the moment; he taught me how to punch.

Just like with the news story, I only remember the outline of it all. Don't tuck your thumb under your fingers--that's how you break it. Keep your stance grounded. Shift your weight from your back foot to the front as you move your arm.

I'll be honest. I don't know if any of that is good punching advice. My dad is a gentle man who doesn't punch anybody. Plus, he's 6'4"--if he wanted to, he could probably get a good hit in whether he was punching properly or not. Personally, I haven't punched anyone yet and I don't plan to. I'm not sure I'd do it right if I had to.

When I was fifteen, my Girl Scout troop did a special Krav Maga seminar.

It was October, I remember, because I was going to a Halloween party immediately afterwards. Two hours of self-defense and then some good spooky fun; y'know, your typical teenage night.

I've always thought Krav Maga was an interesting fighting style. I like its focus on efficiency over style or some people's idea of "honorable fighting". Target your opponent's weakest points--you're trying to end a fight quickly, not prettily. Not that I've done a lot of Krav Maga in my life! I just find it intriguing.

So anyway, we spent two hours learning to go for the eyes, the groin, etc. There was a girl a few grades above me who took high level classes at the Krav Maga studio, and she was brought in to run through exercises with the instructors.

I literally don't remember any of the self-defense techniques we learned in the seminar. I do, however, remember the way the male instructor kept grabbing his assistant's hand and putting it over his crotch--to show us the place we were supposed to grab and twist. I remember my friend leaning over to me and whispering, in that incredulous mocking tone that so often belies genuine discomfort, "Does he have to keep doing that?"

When I was seventeen, they made all the girls in the senior class spend a whole day in a self-defense workshop specifically tailored towards teaching young women how to "protect themselves" from the threat of sexual assault.

They started the class by telling us how likely it was that each of us would be assaulted in college. 1 in 5, the statistic was, if I remember correctly. Then they taught us about how to break out of holds we might find ourselves in, how to use our opponent's weight and momentum against them.

Meanwhile, as the girls learned to fight for our lives, the boys were in a workshop called "Choices". I can't imagine what the choices were.

Now, there's a lot I could say here: about how the division of these classes ignores male rape victims, about how the gender binary is a sham anyway, so on and so forth. But I'll say this. Just like with the punch, I remember the shape of things they taught us, but I don't know that I could enact any of those techniques successfully. I don't know if any of it could save me.

Because that's the point, isn't it? People recommend self-defense because they want it to "save" you. They tell you to buy a gun because maybe that will "save" you. Drape yourself in armor, learn to fight, do not be soft--this will "save" you, you will be spared.

Do they know that so often, the person doing violence to you is someone you love? Someone you trust? A friend, a family member, a lover? Someone you would never imagine raising a hand to?

I'm not saying self-defense can't be empowering. And perhaps, if I bought a gun or a taser or a particularly menacing pepper spray, I would sleep easier at night. But I think we need to stop acting like the only way to stop sexual assault is to make potential victims "strong" enough.

It's like trying to stop up a leaking dam with a bandaid. And then, after the flood, asking the drowned village why they didn't make their adhesive strong enough.

By Laura Browne

My name is Laura, and I am a lot of things, but mostly I'm a storyteller. No matter the medium--be it art, writing, performance, or simple word of mouth--I think that the act of telling stories is the most sacred and beautiful part of human life. I'm passionate about opening the door to having honest conversations about difficult topics. I think it's an act of tremendous bravery, sharing your story and opening yourself up to listen to someone else's. I am trying to be brave. I hope you are too.

Wait and See





Artist Statement:

By viewing AFAB folx from both behind and in front of the camera, these pieces compare the reality versus the media version of objectification and rape culture. Autonomy is often stripped away from AFAB folks when they are looked at through a male gaze, often exaggerated in film. The collages are placed in nature in order to contradict western industrialization and societal gender roles within the film industry. Cinema is a result of industrialization, which both relieved AFAB folx from traditional roles and furthered their oppression through the lens of camera. When an AFAB person picks up a camera, they are inherently contradicting the objectifying gaze and a history of tyranny.

By Ilana Slavit

Ilana Slavit (she/they) is a sex educator and filmmaker passionate about intersectional media representation and reproductive justice. They are a survivor of sexual violence and have made it their mission to promote consent and pleasure based sex education. In her free time you can find her collaging, watching too many movies or dancing in the mirror to Hyper Pop.

volcano

when Vesuvius erupts
she is pitting olives
tearing the salty teardrop flesh
from wrinkled stone heart

Gershwin and God in the kitchen
singing to her
in polyphonic frenzy

as the blood wells up
from a slice that
she does not yet feel

the ash begins pouring
from her eyes, her nose
her throat

Rhapsody in magma
God's voice suddenly silent

and she
this mother

who has buried friends
and cradled broken children
in her arms

is petrified

my mother collected angels

an ever expanding army
of holy companions,
gifted one by one
on Christmas mornings
to keep watch
over the soul of a daughter
who would eventually sever all ties

to Christmas—even to winged beauties
floating on boughs of fir in a halo of vanilla.
i traded them in
for the angel who wrestled with Jacob,
and left him wounded at dawn.
his angel has never visited

me, and my own angels are watching
over nothing, quiet and mournful
inside a long-defunct
department store box.

should i have saved
those benevolent guardians for my own babies
rather than entrusting them
to the angel of Israel
who would turn a blind eye
to strangers in the night?

By Jamie Tortorello-Allen

Being the mother of a survivor was a trauma in its own right, but one that I understood couldn't be the center of our family's experience. I think I turned to writing to help me acknowledge my own pain and to tell my own small piece of the story. I realized, in creating my poetry, just how broken I was feeling and how much I needed to find my own path to healing. These two poems are a part of that process for me.

Arise

They told me when I was very young
I would never fly
Let alone make it in this world
Or survive
I was broke
Torn to shreds
Built back up
Only to be shattered again
Violent cycles that never seemed to end
After a while
I started to give in
To the voices in my head
The ones that weigh me down
Soon the numbness consumed
Everything that I was
Drowning my sorrows in alcohol
Trying to reclaim my body as mine
I stared in the mirror
Didn't recognize who I see
How could I be the reflection staring back at me
Flashes of the memories rapidly consume my brain
The shame creeps in
Am I to blame?
It echoes over and over and over again
Destructive habits ran me to the ground
Soon I lost my sense of self
Life began to feel hopeless
Then quickly shifted to pointless
I fade to black
Multiple times
Only to wake up in blank white rooms
They say once you've hit rock bottom
There's nowhere else to go but up
So, I did
Begrudgingly at first
As time passed it felt less like a chore
After a while I learned I was never actually broken at all
My wings were fit for flying
The war is still ongoing

But I know for sure
That I can win, of course
I will be victorious
I will come out on top
I am a survivor after all.
Some days will feel like defeat
But it will never end me
For I am a phoenix rising from the ashes
You never will clip my wings.

By Jenni Pantoja

Writing has always been a part of who I am. I've found it is a great way to be vulnerable and share a piece of myself with others. I don't exactly know what path I'd like to take for my future, but I do know I want it to be one in which I can help others as well as myself. This piece is a start.

Defiantly

I wish I didn't have to say, "me too,"
That I didn't have to expect you to say the same.
But what's done is done and what is said is said,
And now we too must keep fighting.
Life in full is pain and despair among the bliss and contentedness.
But burden of pain isn't carried alone.

It took me years to heal from where I was bruised,
to grow from where I was buried,
But years in the ground wasn't time wasted,
It was growing, healing.

Look at the garden, every beautiful flower was once buried
Under dirt, no light let in. Yet,
Defiantly, they emerge, stand tall, still have sweetness to give.
And from birth to death never are they alone;
The soil, the sun, the rain, provide tender comfort.
Too many have been buried, planted, that is true.
For better or for worse. Me, too.

Planted in the darkness but nurtured all the same,
Now you may see the light again, bliss, content, growth.
To be hurt isn't to be killed, and to continue to rise
From your lowest point is the strongest thing we can do.

By Alekz Thoms

Alekz Thoms is a nonbinary multimedia artist whose art tends toward the autobiographical and political. They often collaborate with other artists, as with the piece "Defiantly," which was commissioned by a musician to be composed into a duet for two sopranos. It is a message of strength, of growth, of community power from a mother to their child.

 Songs of Survival 