



SURVIVORS TO SUPERHEROES PRESENTS;

# SONGS OF SURVIVAL

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Cover Art by Julia Tortorello-Allen

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## Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

As we bring you the latest edition of Songs of Survival, I am reminded once again of the profound strength and resilience that infuses every piece of writing our authors share with us. This issue, like those before it, stands as a testament to the indomitable spirit of survivors who find solace, expression, and empowerment through poetry, art, and writing.

The path to creating this journal is never straightforward. It is a journey marked by courage, vulnerability, and the relentless pursuit of a space where voices long silenced can be heard. Each piece is a window into the experiences and emotions of individuals who have endured unimaginable pain, yet continue to forge forward with bravery and grace.

We are honored to provide a platform that acknowledges and amplifies these voices. The poems in this issue are not just words on a page; they are the songs not only of survival, but of healing, and of reclaiming one's own narrative. They remind us that art can be both a refuge and a rallying cry, and that through creativity, we can find our way to a better world.

In my own experience as a survivor of sexual violence, writing has been the defining feature of my journey towards healing and empowerment. What started with a Victim Impact Statement continued with narrative writing, which encouraged me to grapple with the permanent mark sexual violence had left on me. I earned a profound respect for the power that words can have, for both those who read them and those who write them.

There is nothing more meaningful to me than working with our authors who bravely transform their pain into art. Whether they do it with words, in the form of poetry or narrative writing, or with visual and other forms of artistic expression, their power shines through the pages and inspires us with both its creativity and its resilience.

To our authors, we extend our deepest gratitude. Your willingness to share your stories and insights is a gift that resonates far beyond the confines of this journal. Your writing contributes to a larger conversation about sexual violence, healing, and justice, and we are deeply moved by your trust in us to hold and honor your work.

To our readers, we hope this issue offers not only a space for reflection but also a source of strength and solidarity. We invite you to engage with these poems with an open heart, recognizing the courage it takes to put such intimate truths into words.

As always, we are committed to supporting our community of writers and readers. If you are inspired by the work you see here, we encourage you to reach out, engage, and continue the dialogue. Together, Survivors to Superheroes aims to create a network of understanding and support that transcends the written word.

Thank you for being a part of this journey with us. Your presence, whether as a reader or a writer, is invaluable in nurturing a space where voices of resilience and empowerment continue to thrive.

Katy Mullins (she/her)  
Editor, *Songs of Survival*

## Content Warning

Our journal, *Songs of Survival*, explores many topics that may be triggering for you. Before every piece of writing, we have identified major triggers, such as rape, incest, abuse, self harm, and suicide. You can find these warnings at the top of the page, before the title of each piece. If there are no content warnings before a piece, then the Survivors to Superheroes board and staff members who produce *Songs of Survival* did not flag any common or seemingly obvious triggers. This does not mean that you won't find the piece triggering, and we invite you to take your time and take breaks when you need it while exploring the journal.

All of the work in this journal is centered around the theme of survival after sexual violence. Trauma is often all-encompassing, hard to contain, and triggers can come out of nowhere. Every person has their own triggers that are individual and unique. It is sadly impossible for us to flag all of them for you, but we have tried to provide some guides to help you as you read through the journal.

If you are triggered, make sure to take care of yourself! Take a breath, get some water or tea, grab a snack, and take the time you need. If you are able to return to reading, that's wonderful. But if you can't, that is completely okay as well! Taking care of yourself, your recovery, and your own well-being is always what is most important.

Thank you for taking the time to read *Songs of Survival* and sharing a part of yourself with us and our contributors. We hope that this collection of work helps you in whatever way you need.



**CW: Assault, Coercion/Power Imbalance**

## **Retrieving a Laptop from the Boss's Hotel Room**

It should be on the desk by the door  
and cool to the touch,  
but it's neither,  
and the fan isn't humming  
so it must've been lap-heated,  
and the browser is open,  
each window holding a different captive  
which holds the eyes captive until

a draft announces the door opening,  
but there's no sound, and what hotel hinge is silent  
unless it's been . . . cared for,  
and who stops like a stonewall in the threshold,  
heels outside, toes inside,  
unless they're gauging what might try to  
lunge or squeeze through the space  
between body and doorframe.

The scene splinters  
into a dozen smaller scenes,  
still life paintings at an S&M exhibition  
some naive gallerina got trick-fucked into working:  
closed pleated curtains, their tiebacks  
far from home and wrangle-dangled over the headboard,  
an unplugged lamp,  
a slippery plastic bottle indenting a pillow,  
the absent "Do Not Disturb" sign  
standing guard as an unwitting accomplice;  
innocuous displays by themselves,  
but collectively malignant, spawning

a pregnant pause  
(or maybe just a pause who's missed a period  
after being asked to retrieve the boss's laptop)  
that escorts both sets of eyes from curtains  
to doorframe to bed to headboard,  
above which hangs a cheap copy  
of *Leda and the Swan*.

By Kiyoshi Hirawa

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*Kiyoshi Hirawa is a poet, writer, and former police officer who was wrongfully terminated after reporting sexual misconduct and rape committed by fellow police officers. Hirawa's work focuses on trauma, resiliency, hope, and providing a voice for the unheard, ignored, and overlooked.*

## **CW: Allusions to Assault**

### **Valhalla**

I hope one day  
I get to go to Viking heaven  
My ideal afterlife involves  
Shirtless Nordic men, for sure.  
But I think

I am already in Valhalla  
Because I have already died in battle  
A war  
I lost when I was 19  
I imagine that the parts of me that died  
Are now sitting on clouds among the gods  
I am applauded  
Called a hero  
For my bravery  
I put up a good fight, Odin will say  
But even the best of men  
Will fall when someone  
Puts a knife into them

In this paradise  
I am not called broken or traumatized  
For what a man did to me  
I am simply  
Another fallen soldier  
No pity given  
And the only words they use for me  
Are strength and perseverance.

When I imagine Valhalla, I imagine all the people  
Who lost battles with themselves  
And ended up there with me  
And I wonder how many of them  
Are still walking among us.

By Stone

**CW: Violence, Injury**

## **Song of the Vishakanya (The Light Within Her Pores)**

Bathed deep in myrrh, she braved the maw and licked its poison lips,  
then thrust her veins to harpies' claws and sheathed their toxic tips.  
Unswayed, she drew the hydra's breath, inhaling fatal scent,  
while to its tail and scourging death, defiant, snarled assent.

"What you've imbibed and have received is what you shall imbue,"  
the torment Captor seethed, deceived; the lashing stripes accrued.  
But though the chalice once was forced, the poison coursing deep,  
the Hands wring white with dark remorse for what she now secretes.

As lions maul their chains until the shackles slip their throats,  
not alchemy, but force of will divines the antidote.  
A theriac of peace unmoved by vict'ry or defeat  
leaves spinning, meting Fates reproved, the third cast in retreat.

At dusk, the Vishakanya stands, the Battle's bright vanguard;  
a spear that no man shall command, whose blade leaves none unscarred.  
As dagger clouds sculpt waning moon, her hands with dirks bedight  
eviscerate 'til dawn is hewn; her stars impale the night.

"The anguish suffered and endured is not what I bequeath;  
once left inured, but now wrought pure, I lance what lies beneath.  
The victim's venom I renounce, the wasted flesh excised,  
with scars whose marble glint announces agony's demise."

The whip that stung now strings her bow, hollyhocks on quiver;  
shafts of linden, carved from echoes, burrow deep and shiver.  
The Captor gasps as bolts take hold, marooned upon pain's shore,  
pinned perpetual to behold: the light within her pores.

By Kiyoshi Hirawa

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*Kiyoshi Hirawa is a poet, writer, and former police officer who was wrongfully terminated after reporting sexual misconduct and rape committed by fellow police officers. Hirawa's work focuses on trauma, resiliency, hope, and providing a voice for the unheard, ignored, and overlooked.*

## The Aftermath's Castle

The following is not so much an essay as the transmission of a fable to those in various stages of healing after trauma. Moreover, this tale does not invent insight so much as dispense old insight in new packaging. The beauty of tried and true wisdom is that it never needs to reinvent itself, though it routinely relents to be co-opted by the latest cinema, music, and art (and fables). It's not wisdom's fault we need to rebrand it to sustain its resonance and relevance. Indeed, there's nothing new under the sun, but sometimes, sapience demands a new voice so new ears may hear. With that in mind, this story is for those recovering from trauma, especially trauma inflicted by those in positions of power.

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Once upon a time, there were three princesses—identical triplets. They lived with the royal family in a kingdom that had never known war, rebellion, plague, or famine. However, on the triplets' eighteenth birthday, a tyrant seized power and executed every member of the royal family . . . except the three princesses.

But this exception was no act of mercy. Ever the sadist, the tyrant exiled the princesses, believing that being banished with horrific memories was worse than death. Thus, one cold, rainy morning, soldiers unlocked the prison gates, unchained the princesses, and marched them through the mud past the hanged members of the royal family. But as they neared the gate, the tyrant appeared and invited each princess to take one object from the kingdom.

The first princess immediately ran to the nearest soldier and ripped away his spear. She departed the kingdom at full sprint, the spear dragging on the ground behind her. Her burst carried her only a short distance away, where she began building a castle and raising an army. Every month, she used her castle to launch an assault on the tyrant's ill-gotten kingdom. And every month, she failed. Her castle grew stronger, her army more powerful, and her desire for revenge burned hotter, but she still could not overcome the tyrant. She spent the rest of days amassing an ever-increasing army and planning progressively more complicated attacks that always failed. She died young, her spear in her hand and her gaze fixed on what was once her family's kingdom.

As the second princess was being banished, she chose a book containing the history of the kingdom. She ventured far beyond the tyrant's border, across mountain ranges and rivers which had never been mapped. So far, in fact, that no one had ever heard of her, her family, or the tyrant's evil deeds. After finding a suitable settlement, she burned the book, built a new castle, and established a new kingdom. But no one ever knew the history of the kingdom, and the princess forbade anyone from learning how it had arisen. In time, her kingdom shrunk to the confines of the tall castle walls, and few people left. Even fewer visited. The princess spent the rest of her days silencing those who asked about their people's origin.

As the third princess was being banished, she wept bitterly, walking behind her two sisters in the frigid rain. But before she left the kingdom, never to return, she selected a small stone from the castle wall. The third princess strode beyond the castle walls and just past the borderlands until she stopped weeping. Then, stooping down, she placed that small stone in the ground and began building a new castle. The weather was fickle in that part of the land; on some days, she could see her old kingdom, while on other days, she could not.

Regardless of the weather and the views it offered, she began constructing a new castle and a new kingdom. Her efforts took much longer than her two sisters, but gradually, her castle grew into a colossus, a massive center of activity that connected kingdoms far and wide. She raised an army, but when her general asked if they should prepare plans to attack the tyrant, she declined, explaining that her army's purpose was to defend, not attack.

Her kingdom's prosperity attracted the attention of the tyrant, who shamelessly attempted to establish diplomatic and economic ties. The princess acknowledged but refused the tyrant's request. Without her aid, the tyrant's power withered. He spent the rest of his days watching his kingdom decay until, one fateful night, rebellion poured through the castle gates and slaughtered him.

Every year, the third princess told her people the story of how their kingdom came to be, sparing no detail. The small stone, formerly of the kingdom from which she was cruelly banished, was now the cornerstone of her new and mighty empire. Instead of attempting to destroy or silence the past, her kingdom recognized its painful origin, acknowledging how anguish and resilience were two sides of the same reluctant coin that had purchased their mighty nation.

One day, an elderly queen from a distant realm visited the third princess. The younger royal spared no expense and honored the queen with an evening ball. Everyone from the kingdom was invited. After the banquet, as musicians played and dancing began, the queen turned to the princess.

Amidst the merriment, the queen quietly relayed how a similar tyrant had murdered her family and seized her kingdom decades before. The queen explained how tyrants had decimated realm after realm over countless centuries. When she finished, the queen smiled kindly at the princess's stunned expression. Taking her hand without any trace of condescension, she said, "Dear heart, did you think you were the only one?"

The princess permitted and acknowledged the tears in her own eyes, as was her people's custom. "No," she said, "it just always felt that way."

The queen asked to be taken to the highest point in the castle. The princess took her to the tallest spire, from which the castle lights of numerous neighboring realms could be seen.

The queen gazed upon the horizon. "Every castle holds an aftermath," she told the princess, "and every aftermath holds a castle."

By Kiyoshi Hirawa

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*Kiyoshi Hirawa is a poet, writer, and former police officer who was wrongfully terminated after reporting sexual misconduct and rape committed by fellow police officers. Hirawa's work focuses on trauma, resiliency, hope, and providing a voice for the unheard, ignored, and overlooked.*

## **CW: Mentions of Assault**

### **Don't Be Fooled**

I take a deep breath, straighten my spine, and make eye contact.  
I clearly enunciate my words and modulate my voice so  
there will be no doubt of what I said or its veracity.  
My careful, confident delivery is an act of defiance –  
a Fuck-You to the lingering shame.

*I was neglected and sexually assaulted as a little girl.*

Don't be fooled.  
The delivery may be smooth and practiced, detached even,  
but it's difficult and draining to utter those words.  
Each new person I tell, each conversation, each poetry reading.  
I open a portal to my soul, every time.

In that moment, I am no longer  
the strong articulate woman you see before you.  
I'm the 5-year-old, the 8-year-old  
innocent and defenseless.  
The shields are down, the heart is open, the wounds are raw.  
I'm completely vulnerable in that moment.

And after I tell you, I'm operating on autopilot for a few minutes  
because I can't just flip a switch and lock it all down again.  
At the first opportunity I'll need a quiet place to take a few deep breaths  
and to reassure the little girl inside me that she's safe now.  
I won't let anyone hurt her ever again.

By KW

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*KW is passionate about direct, vulnerable, and authentic work that captures the truth of moments.*

*Connection and healing happen in honest moments. Visit her website [WriteSpeakHeal.com](http://WriteSpeakHeal.com) to learn more.*

## Lanterns and Lampposts

When he grew up, he was still afraid of the dark.

*Carry your own light*, they shrugged.

So, trusting his guides, he tried self-igniting,  
earnestly combusting, but he could not abide  
hunkering within some candle's bunker,  
striding past the huddled lumps,  
fleeing the lurching clumps  
of desolate silhouettes  
who hailed the passing lanterns' bayonets.

He learned:

*walk by lantern, light your feet;  
walk by lamppost, light the street.*

He resolved:

*I will not carry my own light.*

Instead, bidden by kindness, his hidden art;  
and forgiveness, his invisible legacy,  
he buried his own light  
in others,  
deep as the night was dark,  
grafting a buoyancy that patched the soul's weakest part,  
a laborious luminescence, a crescent moon,  
half-victorious, but waxing full,  
culling the night, mulling the heights auroras might blaze;  
he stoked the embers, coaxing the rays, until flames awoke,  
sparks and specks rescued from twilight's deceit,  
his surrogate children,  
not orphans or runaways  
or strays cast in the street by fathers and mothers,

not *lanterns*,

but lampposts, sisters and brothers turned into beacons,  
weakening the night, waking the day,  
wicks leveling the tower,  
brick by wicked brick  
until the darkness swayed and shattered and scattered.

He resolved:  
*I will not carry my own light.*

He saw:  
*lodestars lining the lane.*

By Kiyoshi Hirawa

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