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Survivors to Superheroes Presents

# *Songs of Survival*



Cover Art by Alex Cumiskey

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## Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

I was fresh out of college with what felt like a useless English degree and absolutely no sense of direction when I first started with *Survivors to Superheroes* last year. Helping with the literary journal seemed like the perfect opportunity to bridge the gap between my passion for reading and writing and providing support to survivors, which was at the forefront of my mind after some close friends and family came forward with their own stories. While working on *Songs of Survival*, I've been lucky to find that my admiration for writing has expanded as I witnessed it being used as a guiding hand, helping survivors in their path to healing.

In college, my professors encouraged me to extract the heaviest thoughts from the deepest corners of my mind and force them onto the physical page in front of me to face head on. Each night I would station myself in front of my notebook and scrawl out pages of inner turmoil, hurt, pain, and confusion that had been plaguing my mind throughout the day. I could see it in front of me, evicted from my brain. Slamming that notebook shut, where those thoughts remained, was about the closest thing I had to free therapy.

This isn't to say that writing should necessarily stand in as a substitute for therapy, but more that it's a valuable option if you're feeling lost or unsure. Writing is a way for you to step in front of the microphone and speak without interruption. It's a place for you to express yourself to whatever extent you're most comfortable. It's an option where you have the power to control your narrative. With *Songs of Survival*, I grew to appreciate that writing can especially serve as an outlet for survivors to work through complex feelings and be heard. With our journal, we encourage and support survivors and their loved ones who feel compelled, inspired, or interested, to do this.

Our first published issue was a journey from cover to cover, showing pain, trauma, growth, and healing from a community of exceptional poets, writers, and artists who expressed themselves in every form. Their stories detailed the theme of survival and what it meant to them, from traumatic experiences to mental struggles and validating epiphanies that followed. Some stories offered signs of hope, while others proved that survival falls on a different timeline for every person. Each perspective presented a powerful take on the definition and dimensions of survival, through the lens of both survivors and their loved ones.

For our second issue, we were fortunate enough to receive a new round of submissions from an equally breathtaking set of writers. Their submissions, which you'll be reading soon, carefully explore the nuances of survival, with each piece contributing its own powerful message. Although every painting, poem, article, and piece of prose is centered around the same theme, you'll find that there is no repetition within these pages. Both issues of *Songs of Survival* fall in line with the mission envisioned by our co-founders, Julia and Jamie, providing a safe space for survivors to share their stories and make their voices heard. I couldn't be more proud.

Too often, survivors decide to keep their story and trauma to themselves, because they feel they won't receive the support they need. With this literary journal, we hope to give survivors the option to speak freely so they are no longer silenced by the institutions that so frequently look to suppress their stories. It takes a lot of strength to revisit and face traumatic memories head on. To all of the talented writers and artists who have contributed pieces to our literary journal, your voice matters, and is heard.

And most importantly, you're not going through this alone.

To our dear readers, I won't lie, the contents of this literary journal are heavy. It can get overwhelming to read the accounts of multiple survivors whose stories cover sensitive topics. Our team has carefully placed content warnings at the beginning of each submission for your consideration. Please take care when reading our journal, and be sure to step away when needed. While I hope that you find validation or comfort in connecting with our contributors' pieces, your wellbeing is paramount. Separate yourself from your computer or phone if you need to; our literary journal isn't going anywhere.

Without further ado, I present to you our second issue of *Songs of Survival*. Please be sure to spread the word to your friends and family, or post about us on social media to ensure that our contributors' voices truly are heard. Thank you for your continued support—all of us here sincerely hope that your reading brings you meaningful insights and support about survival and what it means to be a survivor.

All the best,  
Alyssa Henderson (she/her)  
Editor-in-Chief of *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, that means that 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 writing 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 be able 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 ok 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: Sexual Violence

### I Used to Dance

I used to dance.  
sweaty nights and backs  
I spun and there was joy  
turning and smiling with  
my lungs

but often they ended with  
him  
in the black  
and little escape.  
at times  
he held me in place –  
with strength I didn't have  
in muscle or  
in courage

days passed, I  
hid and slept.

months later a man who  
wasn't there  
stared coldly at me, his  
wife and told me that I  
liked it.

By Leila (she/her)

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*I am a survivor of sexual assault, and I hope that my poem will help other survivors feel less alone. While writing it, I learned that sometimes what we need most is simply to tell our story and be heard. I am a proud member of the bisexual community and, like many others, I'm on a lifelong journey toward self-discovery and self-love.*

## CW: Sexual Harrassment

### Learning to Look at my Past Self with Compassion

I don't know how to talk about it without blaming myself.

"It" being the frequent, frightening sexual harassment I received through all three years of my time in middle school.

Even now, as I try to gather my thoughts to put the experience on paper, I keep doing it. I keep wanting to write things like, "It happened because I wasn't pretty." "It happened because I was socially awkward and didn't have a lot of friends." "It happened because I was weird and undesirable—and that was the joke, objectifying someone who no one would ever seriously want."

I am aware that this is an absolutely batshit line of thinking. I was a kid. Who cares if I wasn't cool or pretty? I was a kid, and there's nothing in the world that can make a person somehow deserve sexual harassment. It didn't happen because of anything I did or anything I was, it *happened* because boys' violent misogyny and entitlement were left unchecked.

I shouldn't place the blame on myself. I know it doesn't make sense. But I can't stop thinking that way.

When we talk about victim blaming, we are generally referring to the way that guilt and shame is heaped upon survivors from outside forces—everyone from family and friends to authority figures and coworkers, or even just society at large.

For me, though, the call has always been coming from inside the house. I've always been the first one to hurl accusations down upon my own head, to throw myself on the jagged rocks of condemnation. I am startled by my own viciousness.

In a way, I think I'm looking for answers. I'm looking for a reason why this happened to me. Why was I targeted by boys in my grade? Why didn't anybody actually make an effort to stop it? Why didn't anyone protect me? These are valid questions. But somewhere along the way, I've stopped actually trying to answer them and just started blaming myself.

It's like there's a disconnect in my brain. I cannot imagine treating another human being with the same cruelty that I treat myself. I try to picture it, looking someone in the eye and telling them, "Well, maybe you wouldn't have been harassed if you'd just had more friends and been more normal!" The mere thought of it makes my stomach churn.

And that's the worst part: I know it's cruel, I know it's illogical, I know it doesn't make any sense, but I still catch myself tying my brain into knots trying to find a new way that it's all my fault.

At the end of the day, I've never been very good at being kind to myself. It's something I'm trying to work on. More often than not, it's an uphill battle.

Here's a little fact about me: I am, among other things, a teacher. I teach high schoolers, mostly, but I've taught the occasional middle schooler as well. When I think about any of my students going through what I went through, my blood boils. None of them deserve that—no one in the world deserves that.

Lately, I've been trying to distance myself from the girl I was back then and look at her like I'd look at a stranger. Like she was one of my students.

She was very smart. She was funny. She was angry all the time. She was so desperately lonely.

If she was my student, I would have thought she was hilarious. My heart would have broken for her. I would have tried to give her advice, to be someone she could talk to.

And if I saw boys treating her the way I know so many of my teachers saw them treating me, I would have stopped it.

By Laura Browne (she/her)

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*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.*

## **CW: Stealthing, Sexual Violence**

### **It Fell Off, Right?**

*Originally published on the Survivors to Superheroes website*

*The condom was on the floor.* All of a sudden the condom was gone, and condoms don't slip that easily, especially onto the floor. Even if the condom slipped, he would have felt it, right? He should have said something.

I was the one who noticed. I don't remember how far along we went without it. I grabbed another condom. We continued. Bodies were spinning—fingers in my shirt, head in his lap, air stuffy. Everything was too hard and clammy and how can bodies cause so much pain?

We fell asleep. I woke up at 6 a.m. covered in sweat. There was a sticky body next to me. There was a condom on the floor.

I slipped on a hoodie and sweatpants and walked to Safeway. A foggy street. A little old man in a trench coat. Silence making its way down the block. *The condom was on the floor.* I roamed the sterile aisles. How many others stood under fluorescent lighting, trying not to breathe too loudly? Trying not to exist, because then it really did happen. Again.

Two for one pringles was laughable—no one would notice if I popped the lid. No one would notice if I walked straight until the ocean, let the waves reach my eyes, dove under.

It wasn't like there was anything I could do. There are no current laws in the United States that prohibit the nonconsensual removal of condoms, otherwise known as stealthing. Under UK and German law, stealthing is a punishable offense and considered rape. I live in California, a state where the same lawmaker who introduced a bill to criminalize stealthing was accused of sexual harassment. I live in a place where violation is commonplace. Where the men tell me to drink a little more, so everything wrong is hazy around the edges. So I can be the liar.

Everytime I am violated, a small part of my soul breaks off. I go through the stages of grief—denial, guilt, anger, despondency, but never acceptance. I refuse to accept the lack of consequences, the PTSD, the violent rage I feel everytime I see someone contribute to the cycle.

I consume rape revenge films until my eyes go blurry. My therapist calls these fantasy numbers—I have many but violence never absolves. So I—we—are left in limbo. We are fantasy numbers—caught up in the spinning, in the nights we don't remember, in the bodies we want to forget.

*Survivors to Superheroes note: Shortly after this article was written, the State of California enacted a ban on stealthing, which had become a civil, but still not criminal, offense.*

By Ilana Slavit (she/they)

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*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.*

## **CW: Rape**

### **I Scream**

hear me  
danger  
tears burn  
body spasms  
panic

where are you?  
help me!  
trapped  
man on child  
defenceless  
overpowered

tiny body  
he enters me  
oceans of agony  
heavy  
I'm choking  
gasping  
I freeze

my soul seeks  
a place  
away from pain  
body empty  
seconds pass  
he stands  
walks away  
silence

so young  
small  
alone  
bound  
broken  
confused  
shattered  
lost

By Alex Reimers (she/her)

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*I'm a creative intuitive soul with a love for poetry. I choose to write poetry because I can say a lot in a little, and I believe poetry conveys emotion, feeling, thoughts and tells a story. I hope that my poem, I Scream, is a good example of this.*

**CW: Rape**

## **In a Room Red as Night, Your Eyes Give You Away**

Author's Note: These nightmares began simply as nightmares that plagued me for twelve years. Until new meaning came to me from them. I began having memories come in bright, hot, searing flashes of myself experiencing this traumatic event. I came to the realization, with the help of my therapist and friends, that this was a real event from my childhood. My therapist told me the reason I had so severely repressed this event was that I wasn't able to handle such a horrible incident at that young of an age and instead filed it away in my mind in the form of nightmares until I could begin to unpack it. Which is now, at the age of twenty-four. I am still learning to understand this event. I am still learning to accept that this happened to me and piece together my past where I lost so much, including time, my childhood, and myself. I haven't gotten back all my memories of the event itself; however, I've gotten back much of what occurred before and the traumatic aftermath. I want to write about those parts of my story soon, once I get back more—if not all—of my memories, but according to my therapist, that may take years. So for now, here are the events of my nightmares, and if they are anything like what really occurred, then I caution you. Because this was brutal and undeserving.

Thank you and know this: you are not alone.

It starts and ends at a party.

A party.

You've never been to a party, so how would you even know what a party's supposed to be like? Unless it's based off of bad teen TV and movies you've let yourself believe are cool. It's wild and loud and it hurts your ears and you feel like you're overdressed in a white blouse (unbuttoned just enough so you don't look like a prude, of course) and— what's wrong with you? You've had this nightmare on repeat since you were thirteen and can't even remember what else you had on? Fuck. Let's say jeans.

You're awkward, you're older, and you want to leave but you think you came with a friend. Turning, you look towards the corners for a place to sit and there.

There he is.

He's standing in front of you and fuck, he's tall. You stare up and up and he's handsome. More handsome than he should be. Dark shirt, jeans, and a smile you hope is directed at you and not someone else. You can't begin to describe his eyes, but that blue is one you'd only find in the hottest of flames.

They burn into you: bright, smart, and searing.

He opens his mouth and what comes out is deep and smooth. A salutation and an introduction. It's like your head censors his name for you with the pulsing of the music everyone is dancing to. He offers you a drink and that's when you notice he's holding two Solo cups with surprisingly large hands.

But you're smart, remember? You listened to your parents, who always told you to watch your drink. Don't accept one from anyone. Make it yourself. So you take it but don't sip it. Do you realize he's watching you?

You both talk. You stand there and talk. The topic changes every time, so let's just say this one is movies. He loves movies. He's got a huge collection. "We should hang out sometime after this so you can check them out." You'd like that. He stops mid-sentence and stares at you, your face flushing like the schoolgirl you used to be when it all started. You ask him what's wrong and he tells you,

"You have beautiful eyes."

Look at that. That'll never be the same for you again, will it?

He tells you they're beautiful. That he's never seen any like them. He could get lost. Other clichés you just revel in. No one's ever told you those things. Of course, you lap it up. As he tells you, he leans in close so you can hear him better and you can smell him now. His breath smells like cinnamon.

Like Christmas.

He talks quietly to you, so close now that the party music can't reach you. He reaches out and plays with a lock of your long hair, his fingers turning it about in his hand. It feels good. You want to reach up and touch his. You wonder if the gold feels as soft as it looks. You want his arms around you. You might even kiss him before the night's over. You're thankful for the maybe-friend for dragging you to this party.

There's a commotion behind you both, and you two watch as party shenanigans occur. This varies too. We'll just say someone jumped on a folding table and it collapsed beneath them. Hilarious.

But not to you. You're busy with him right now, but as you look up you see him glancing from your cup, to the party-goers, to the steps. You still don't catch on.

"It's loud down here."

He says.

"Wanna go upstairs so we can talk more? I can barely hear anything."

You were smart, remember? You remembered not to drink the drink. But you failed this second test of not going with a guy to a secluded place and this.

This was your mistake.

You were happy to go with him. You wanted to talk more about movies or whatever it was, and since you would be alone maybe you'd kiss him like you wanted. You both go up the steps, passing the drunks and stoners chilling on them. You're excited. So. Excited.

He leads you to the right and takes you to a room at the end of the hall. He opens the door for you. What a gentleman. You walk in and it's a bedroom, but you don't mind. A bed has more room to sit on and is more comfortable than chairs. He shuts the door for you and let's count:

That's the first time he shuts the door for that room.

It won't be the last.

The two of you sit down on the bed and put your drinks on the nightstand. The room is dark except for the light coming through the red curtains from a streetlamp outside. The room is bathed in the red light. It's red as night.

You're on the bed, talking again. More movies, or maybe a different topic this time. You laugh and it's so easy. This is so easy, you think. He's probably thinking the same thing. At least, you hope he is. You want him to like you. You don't know that he's thinking of something different.

He reaches over and takes your hands in his huge ones. They're so warm. He pulls you close and it's cinnamon lips on yours as he kisses you. You can barely breathe, not just from the kiss but from how happy you are. You got to kiss him! You kiss him and kiss him and then something changes. His kiss becomes harder, rougher, stronger. His hands grip yours tight, holding them in his lap. You feel the hardness and you feel fear.

You don't want this. You just wanted to kiss him. You aren't ready. Not at a party. Not here in a stranger's room. You don't even love him. You don't even know his name.

You pull away. Fear in the eyes that gave you away, you tell him no. You tell him thank you, but no. You don't want that.

Ever the charmer, he pleads with you.

"Don't you like me? Don't you want me? I can be your boyfriend. I like you. I want you. Come on. Don't be scared."

He hasn't let go of your hands, mind you.

You say no again, but you can barely finish before his mouth and tongue are on you again. You squirm and rip yourself away, free your hands to push him. This was a mistake. You realize now. He wasn't who you thought he was and you feel like a fool for trusting him. So trusting.

You run for the door and he laughs. You open it quickly, and the roar of the party that was muffled before floods in. It slams shut again. He's next to you with a hand on the door and a smirk on his face as he stares down at you. See? That was the second time he shut the door.

Your heart is thumping as you stare up at him.

“No.”

He tells you.

“You led me on and it’s my turn.”

You hit your head as he spins you and shoves you up against the door. He grabs your arms so hard you can feel the bruises forming as he pins you. He’s laughing and sneering and kissing you. You’re fighting, fighting so hard against him, but he’s strong. How is he so strong?

He pulls away and pulls you with him. With one fluid motion, he tosses you on the bed and you fall, stunned. By the time you realize what’s coming, he’s already on top of you, straddling you with his full weight.

“Having fun?”

He smiles and grabs your arms again, holding both your wrists in one impossibly large hand. You hate that smile. You hate his smell. You hate, you hate, you hate, you hate him.

He reaches down and rips the front of your blouse, sending buttons flying everywhere. You didn’t realize how much you were screaming until then. Jerking up your cute little bra you loved so much, your breasts tumble out. His hand is so hot as it roughly squeezes them. It’s burning and you’re screaming more. You’re screaming from fear, from how much his hands hurt, and from what you know is next. With his free hand, he tugs off your bottoms, your underwear, and at the button of his jeans. You’re yelling and begging and thrashing as he shrugs them out of the way.

“Be a good girl.”

He tears into you and you scream from the pain as a sigh escapes his lips. How can he be enjoying this? How can he like doing this? He lays on top of you, shoving himself in further with each thrust, and stares down at you as he murmurs your name. You try to turn from him and shut your eyes, but he slaps you. Grabbing your face, he forces you to look up at him.

“Look at me.”

He demands, his breath labored.

“Look at me now. Show me those beautiful eyes. Don’t close them now.”

It hurts. It hurts more than anything you’ve ever experienced. He’s so heavy and his hot cinnamon breath on your face makes you sick. You want to throw up. More thoughts cross your mind as your body shakes from his.

Where is everyone? They can’t hear you. Why? You’re screaming so fucking loud. Louder than you ever have and NOTHING. Then you realize it’s the music downstairs. It’s so loud. Pulsing and thumping everywhere. You think it’s shaking the walls until you realize that it’s him, because he’s shaking the bed from how hard he’s moving.

Your whole body is sore. Your bottom half from his thrusting, your mouth from his kissing, your wrists from how hard he’s gripping you, your ears from him panting your name, your throat from screaming.

You want to die. You want to cease. You want to never move again.

“I’m gonna cum,” you hear him say, and how is he faster and rougher than before?

It hurts worse, and his breathing and moans are louder than any sound you’ve ever heard. His whole body is heavy and making you sink into the bed and you can’t breathe and you’ve stopped

screaming and fighting and now you just lay there because maybe you'll get lucky when he's done and he'll strangle you. If only he was that nice a guy.

He lets out a shout as he cums, shoving your body into the mattress as you feel him shake. He forces himself deeper and deeper and you're sinking deeper and deeper and then you fall.

You're falling, out of the red room, out of the bed, out from beneath his heavy body. You're plummeting to the earth like Icarus after being burnt by the sun. A sun with scorching, searing eyes and hot, hot hands that burn with every touch.

You fall and it's a time of reflection because this is now your life. You will be in his arms night after night, week after week, year after fucking year for longer than you'd like or want. Sometimes things will be different. Sometimes it will be a van or an alley or a pool or a school or he has friends or it's someone you know or something fun that you're doing. And he will be by your side for years. Your constant companion in your thoughts every waking moment, and sleeping too. How lucky you are. What a lucky girl you are. You'll jump from touch and sound and breath and smell and words and thoughts and looks and touch and touch and touch and touch and—

You wake up.

By Katherine Wanderer (she/her)

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*Katherine Wanderer is a poet, a novelist, and, most importantly, a survivor who wishes for everyone to know they are not alone. When she is not writing, she spends her time reading, doing creative projects, or enjoying the outdoors. She lives snugly in Indiana with her boyfriend Logan and little hedgehog Monty, surrounded by friends who always support her.*

## **CW: Self-Harm, Sexual Assault**

### **They Don't Hear Me**

I feel like my lips are shut together  
I try to speak, but no one listens whatsoever  
It's like I can't pull the tape off my mouth  
Every time I open it something goes south

Everyone has something to say  
It's all so overwhelming and leaves me in disarray  
I can barely catch my breath as I continue to decay  
In this world where everything seems so gray  
And the tears and the lies in my head constantly replay  
I feel like I have no power, no control, no voice  
Even though people say I have a choice...  
But I can't drown out all the noise  
And I'm left with a passive voice  
One that has no influence, no effect  
One that is continually incorrect  
One that people just reject  
One that doesn't get any respect  
One I wish I could redirect  
So my voice I can resurrect...

How is it possible that I am the one in pain  
Living in shame, wishing I could cut my veins  
When I am not the one to blame?  
Power I wish to obtain  
To speak and have my words break the chain

"It wasn't that serious,  
You're being delirious,"  
Was what my dad said as I tried not to be furious.  
But why would you say that, you idiot?  
He sexually assaulted me...  
He hurt me...  
But instead you want to take his side and be oblivious...  
How? How can you not defend your own daughter?  
But ignore her words as you lead her to the slaughter

My Papi, the man that's supposed to be on my side  
Has left me horrified  
Feeling like I need to "get over it" as I cried  
Because "he was young and didn't know what he was doing"  
When my life he ruined

All this time this anger in me has been brewing  
And no longer is silence something I am pursuing

I'm done feeling ashamed, feeling blamed and constrained  
This masquerade is over and my feelings I will proclaim  
My voice I will reclaim  
My power I will obtain  
Because today strength I have gained  
Despite being dismayed and betrayed  
I know that I am no longer chained  
That my mouth isn't shut is something I can feel in my gut  
My perspective I need to adjust  
So I can confront and not be crushed  
So I won't distrust but begin to reconstruct

By Jenny O (she/her)

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*I am a mental health advocate and counseling intern who desires to give others a voice and aid others in healing and becoming wholistically who they were created to be. I believe God is capable of redeeming every broken thing in my life by giving purpose to my pain. Therefore, I write, knowing and believing that it will encourage and remind others that they are not alone and that there is hope.*

 Songs of Survival 