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Survivors to Superheroes Presents:

SONGS OF SURVIVAL

Cover Art by Julia Tortorello-Allen

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

We're thrilled to mark this spring with a new edition of *Songs of Survival*. Survivors to Superheroes continues to grow; we have welcomed several new members to the organization since last we published, and our various teams are hard at work creating incredible resources for our community. I am lucky enough to sit in on several of these projects and witness the passion and dedication of our volunteers. I speak for our entire organization when I say that we can't wait to share their work with you.

This momentum could not come at a better time. It is always the right time to do this work—but at the moment it feels *particularly* right. Surrounded by uncertainty and instability as we all are, I am comforted by the knowledge that we continue to push forward. The environment has shifted to choke off the provision of care, resources, and empathy to survivors. In the face of change like that, it's easy to be left wondering what we can do against a force that seems so intimidating, so inexorable.

The work in this issue of *Songs of Survival* asks that same question. Our writers face and weather destabilizing forces beyond their control. Natural disasters, astronomical phenomena, roller coasters careening down a track. People. The tide sweeps out to sea. And there are no easy explanations in this journal. There is no question asked that could be easily answered. But our writers ask anyway. The goal is not to find a single, brilliant solution, but to voice the feeling. To say aloud that it is impossible and devastating, standing against something that seems so absolute. The asking is infinitely more powerful than the answer.

We are endlessly grateful to the writers who have chosen to share their work in this issue. I never fail to find inspiration in their honesty and expression. Our philosophy is to share survivors' stories in their own words and voices. Creation is itself cathartic; to speak the truth is an act of radical bravery. In reading the work in this journal, I am reminded that art is an avenue to healing and understanding. It connects us to each other. Even if it does not provide an immediate solution to a problem, it shows us that we are not so alone in anything as we think we are. This is perhaps the greatest gift we can give to ourselves and to each other.

I remain in awe of the incredible team that puts this journal together. It is a labor of love, and there is nothing I am more honored to do than share the load with them. If you or a loved one would like to share writing or artwork in the next issue of *Songs of Survival*, you can submit it on our website. Thank

you to every member of our community who has supported this project, and to everyone who will do so in the years to come. This would not be possible without you.

All my best,

Anna Schwartz (she/her)
Editor-in-Chief, *Songs of Survival*

Content Warning

Our journal, *Songs of Survival*, explores many topics that may be triggering for you. Before every piece, 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 team that produces *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: Violent imagery

The Deer Girl

Poetry gurgles in my stomach,
green bile, aches, I haven't eaten,
I refuse to line my stomach with offerings,
I'll eat when there is meal and a table with someone sitting,
it filters through the sieve of my trembling lips which disfigure my words,
so they curdle,
the punch hole through my chest,
a girl is a deer raised by wolves,

they can smell it in my blood, the predator has their reflexes, their hungers,
and mine, the instinct of prey,
eyes bulge at the sound of the shot which a doe can always hear,
before the blow,
I pulled my body across the forest floor
skinning my knees,
dust and shards of rock muddling the blood,
pressing my palms in the dirt, I claw away from the sound,
I tremble with no wound to point at,
they make you wait,
until light travels to the sound,
illuminating the inherent omen I heard, the cocking of his rifle,

I too am hungry,
so there are pills and disoriented miscast pleasure that is not pleasurable because it hurts it makes my
insides twist and words and words words words and words,
circling the drain,
I can't pull the good ones out,
they all funnel into the ocean,
even the bad ones,
the banal ones,
the great ones escape me too,

the poetry,
all expel from my stomach,
and into the ocean,
the prey never feeds.

By Fish Dell'Angelo (they/them)

My name is Fish Dell'Angelo. I am a 21 year old Nonbinary, Lesbian poet. I am an aspiring librarian and currently an undergraduate at Pace University with a major in Peace and Justice Studies. I am working on a book, this poem is from my book, "Roadkill Empiricisms." My poems are about my lived experience with medical trauma, queerness and sexual assault, tying these things to empowering themes of reclamation, healing, lesbianism, and feminism. If you like my work you can find more of it in Snaggletooth Magazine, and Aphros Magazine.

CW: Abuse

rollercoaster

There were the ways he violated my boundaries
& the ways I continuously allowed it

The ways he disregarded my “no”
& the ways I’d attempt to justify his blatant disrespect

The volatility, the predictability, the exhaustion of so many marathon conversations
anger meant to elicit guilt - “you never loved me, you used me, did you get everything you need?”
sadness meant to elicit kindness - a quivering chin, silent tears, “I love you so much”
self-assuredness meant to elicit fear - “no one will ever love you as much as I love you”

The way the next day he’d pick up right where we left off, like the breakup never happened
& the way that I’d look around and wonder how I was back to a place that I was so sure I had finally left
behind

The ways he asked and asked and asked
& the ways I eventually would acquiesce
an unwanted hug
an unwanted kiss
a sleepover that should never have been

There were the nights out that turned into fights out
& the ways I’d yell, cry, and storm off - unbalanced and disturbed by the power he had to bring out such
an unrecognizable side of me

Every trusted person in my life told me he was
manipulative
toxic
unhealthy
& I would listen, nod my head in agreement, and rush to his defense

& I could say so much more about his behaviors,
but the scariest thing of all
is that I kept getting on the rollercoaster, even though I could feel it slowly destroying me

By Melissa Mendez (she/her)

Melissa lives and loves in Denver, Colorado. She learned the hard way that abusive relationships can happen to anyone and that there is no shame in finding yourself in this kind of pattern. She is grateful to be able to find a creative outlet in the midst of something so challenging and forever thankful for her incredible friends, family, and therapists who have shown her unwavering love, patience, and support.

CW: Rape, injury, suicidal ideation

Blood Moon, Raw

“I think the moon might be trying to kill me.”

The words slip through my lips as casually as a remark about hazy skies, but unfortunately I’m dead serious. The moon thrashes me in its unceasing tidal force, threatening to tear my mind from this dissociated husk of blood, flesh, and bone I call my body.

It used to be mine, at least, until they took it for themselves.

*

We begin beneath the Blood Moon. Stars wheel overhead, the sea breeze shrieks against our ears as we race toward the call of drums. We dance, we twirl, we wade reckless into the red-tinted ocean thigh-deep and fully clothed. Our howls echo in the wind, and I wonder at what might kindle between us.

How could a ritual so euphoric turn out so catastrophically? What horror did they unleash? An existentially ruinous fuckery begotten in betrayal. It twists life into a sensory nightmare and sends both revelers careening. Oh to know what it is to fly, just once, before the river swallows what little remains of me.

Tony Soprano saw ducks in the pool. They flew away, so why couldn’t he?

I see gulls above the seawall, flapping frantically yet frozen by the wind. Foam rages behind them, stirred to agitation by the approaching storm and the grip of the moon. The gusts whirl with fury far too long unwept, and I too long to weep.

*

Each week, their dice clatter across the table from mine. They play a moon druid called Io after the volcanic orb that encircles Jupiter. In game, I am Austir, a PTSD-laden fighter imbued with the power of lightning incarnate. A Goddess compelled to rage as a spellstorm entrusts me to carry Her core trapped within a ring. Io carries a sack of pebbles along with the same careless abandon they wield in real life.

Every Tuesday for two years we carpool to our campaign, but seldom do we occupy our preferred seats. I clench my jaw through motion sickness riding shotgun, while the self-described “passenger princess” drives. A consequence of my work schedule. We trade stories about our lives, about our partners, about kinky antics we’ve observed and concocted. A casual exchange, so I believed.

Unbeknownst to me they collect every kernel, squirrelling away the sequence of buttons they’ll push to destroy me just as their moon druid gathers pebbles to barter in place of currency. A zany bit riffing on their inability to understand the ethics of exchange. Of what is yours and what is mine and what is free to take and what is not.

In hindsight, that bit’s not so silly anymore.

*

“I don’t mean the literal moon,” I hasten to explain. “Many moons conspire to kill me.”

Truly, as many moons as atrocities stalk this rampant year. Four supermoons lurk on the calendar, each brightening the intrusive flashbacks that haunt my waking nightmares. Earth’s orbit captures a pseudo-lunar asteroid, doubling the tides’ fatal pull. Inked beneath my skin, the matching shape of their crescent druidic symbol brands their touch upon me forever. Another moon reemerges between my legs from a decade’s welcome absence and clings between dysphoric, poisoned lips.

But Io’s unwelcome touch is the heaviest moon by far.

*

I remember driving. Was it en route to Renn Faire or back?

Io’s player probes from the back seat with a barrage of “innocent” questions . . . Mid-divorce, their rebounds cascade in wild flails. They prod and push to learn how closely they can nuzzle against the boundary *don’t fuck in the friend pool* without backlash.

I enter the conversation last and choose my words carefully, wholly unsuspecting of how painfully prescient they will soon prove.

“Not fucking in the friend pool is about collateral damage if it goes wrong,” I offer, heedless of the cracks splintering directly beneath me. The cavernous maw will devour me whole before moonset that very night as they intertangle our limbs in a festering, inescapable knot.

*

In game, Io pushes a button that activates a trap. Air whooshes out of the room, plunging half the party into a vacuum. I call on my Goddess’s gifts, breathing water to survive.

Out of game, I cannot breathe water. I can only choke on moonlight. I beg my brain to stop drawing parallels between Dungeons & Dragons and assault, but my brain cannot hear me beneath the suffocating panic.

I cannot breathe, I cannot breathe, I still feel their hand on my neck. I still feel their teeth on my neck. I still feel the sting of the bruise.

They pushed the wrong button and sucked up the air, and now I cannot fucking breathe.

Beneath the waning obscurity of a clouded gibbous moon, my intrusive flashbacks take the shape of a spell card,

Ritual Casting to Ravage a Friendship, it reads.

Somatic component: caress, Suggestive. intimate.

*Wisdom save to resist,
Sleeping victims roll with disadvantage.*

*On an inevitably failed save,
Victim awakens in pliable subspace, remains beguiled and unaware of the casting’s influence for
the Duration:
7 days.*

The clouds part, and the gibbous whispers, “They ask for consent, they do not receive it. They complete the ritual anyway.”

Vocal component: Kiss me.

Damage: Cataclysmic.

*

My therapist utters the word with ease. Such an ugly, unpalatable four letters for those who have never faced them. Uglier still for those who have. I long for her peaceful acceptance as the sounds form shape on her lips. I long to merely feign her calm demeanor in the word's presence instead of flinching back in fear. I dare not utter it aloud, certain its harsh corners will catch along my throat, tearing and clawing in a fit of twinges and coughs. I dare not even type it out with trembling, unsettled fingers.

There's a spot on the side of my neck where I carried their bite marks through a week of denial. My tender *sore-venir* I called it in playful ignorance. Every time I touched it, I stung inside and out. The outward pain brought a curling smile to my masochistic lips. The inner brought bewilderment, until the bruise faded and the denial with it.

The Blue Moon rises, plunging me to darker depths. Waves crash atop one another, intensity without cease. First, anger. I scream my throat raw until blazing red shrinks from the corners of my vision, but fear steals my breath before I can savor the brittle pain. Anger's red glaze dissolves into the speckled daze of panic verging on losing consciousness altogether. I am long in catching my breath, and my grasp on it fails instantly, swept away in a tidal snotstorm wracked by choking sobs.

A katana cleaves the moon into two crisply mirrored halves, one enshadowed, one ablaze. I feel the ghost of their fingers fiddling with my bare sleeping flesh, unraveling the worn thread of my sanity.

I strike another match.

The burns salve the wounds that words can't reach.

I want to hurt myself. I want to fuck them again to hurt us both. I want to crawl beneath the cover of denial and smother the unspoken suffering under the catharsis of pleasure and pain. If I cannot undo the hurt, I long to seize it by the reins and plow deeper.

If I dig deep enough, will I find myself on the other side?

*

By the time the sliver of waning crescent lingers in the sky, wounds blanket my body. Scrapes surround my knuckles, bruises sprawl my inner thigh. Trophies of trees surmounted in a futile quest to flee gravity's grasp. The rows of burns blaze scarlet. For good or ill, it quiets the cognitive dissonance to adorn myself in injury.

I cannot recall the shape of the moon on the night I try to kill Austir. I only recall the cold bite of PTSD crushing me in game and out. I strove to sever the stain from my character sheet like a necrotic limb crying for amputation. I longed to be free of its strangling vice, no matter the cost.

So I fasten the noose watertight and leap through a grate where my party cannot follow, directly into the jaws of a death trap. I stare down the glamourless face of an Aboleth, alone and apart. A willing victim to a hopeless cause.

But I cannot excise this treasured piece of myself to cleanse the rest. PTSD still leers at me from Io's vacant chair across the table, stroking its slimy tentacles over my dice tray, probing and prodding and testing my defenses for weakness. No, character death cannot spare me. It can only steal more of myself away. I clench my fists so hard my nails draw blood from calloused palms as I rue all they have taken: my safety, my sanity, my body without my consent. They cannot have Austir too.

In my final gasp, I seize every resource remaining: my fighter's *Action Surge*, my Dungeon Master's mercy, my final spell slot, and my Goddess's power to *Compel* – an ability of Her ring so on-the-nose traumatic I never imagined I'd find cause to use it. I forgot it even existed, until I needed it to survive.

I looked death in the face willingly without a sure way back.

And despite my darkest intentions discovered that when it counted most, I kept fighting straight through the heart of the storm.

*

Time ceases all meaning in the psych ward. Moonlight cannot penetrate two panes of frosted glass, and its crater-faced source can neither touch nor kill me here despite my own wistful efforts. I twist my body into cleansing asanas, desperate to distract from the mind-numbing scent of despair and sanitized linoleum.

The first night I am free, I rush to greet the ocean, savoring the taste of salt in the fresh air. A streetlight crackles so noisily I hear it hissing and popping halfway to the crashing waves.

No moon leers overhead to drown the starlight tonight. The city that never sleeps glows distant on the northern horizon, but it cannot touch the crown of constellations either. They shine unrestrained, unafraid amidst circling bats and elusive shooting stars. My eyes drift shut to the surge and seethe of the tide while the wheel of stars spins overhead. As the world goes black at the edges, I wonder, is this the dawn of something New?

*

Against all odds, something resembling life persists, until it catches the celestial bodies in its topsy-turvy dance. The sun casts a geomagnetic storm by night, and the moon hovers by day, waxing the barest delicate crescent sharp enough to slice open the sky and frail enough to snap at a gasp. It is so precariously thin that it takes me a moment to find it again as I sink into a shoulder-rinsing twist against the grass. I breathe in as much gratitude as I can muster while the raised parts of my flesh once seared by a stove-heated blade taste the fire of the sun.

Then the aurora explodes overhead, bleeding into the abyssal darkness in all the shades of my wounded heart. With eyes rapt above, I nearly trip over a bird's corpse, barely hopping past its wings sprawled wide and crooked.

A sign from the Olympians, tinged with Zeus's touch. He favors signs sent by bird, so Homer's *Odyssey* explains. I reassure myself that Death is ever the sign of rebirth. That the message is not defeat, but triumph. It means an obstacle in your path will *nearly* trip you up.

But it won't.

*

In six moons, I have three dreams and countless nightmares.

In my kindest fantasies, a Muse descends, resplendent on a plinth larger than life with her legs spread wide. My tongue laps up nectar sweet as ecstasy between her lips while her winding hair binds me weightless. I shudder as inspiration thrusts within me.

In my cruelest fantasies, I hatefuck my rapist.

My coworker chastises me when I refer to them as *my rapist*. But it's not the ugly word that rankles him. "I keep telling you, you don't want to *own* that shit."

I take to referring to them in what becomes casual conversation as *the person who gave me PTSD* as if it were an STD.

I guess in my case, technically, it is.

*

I relive the night of Renn Faire again, and again, and again. I watch a fire dancer mount a ladder of scimitars bare-footed. She calls for a volunteer. I thrust their elbow upward, filling them with confidence I will later regret. They are tall enough to scoop an insect effortlessly from our Dungeon Master's ceiling. They are so much bigger, so much stronger than I.

We part with a memento: a fire-dancing miniature. It lies discarded in a bag I cannot bear to unpack for six months.

The sun's fire echoes against a blazing full moon as a typhoon of anger returns to me. I release it in a clattering symphony of shattered glass. The shards sing a soft, rolling dirge to quell my agony. Would that falling apart were always so beautiful.

Anger thaws the frozen stillness. I begin to paint a brighter tomorrow that I cannot truly feel. A Blue Moon streak adorns my scalp, and freshly rolled skylit walls the shade of a Luna Moth's wings tempt me toward dreamless Trazodone-aided sleep. Keep your enemies closer, they say. The moon hasn't conquered me yet.

I cover their tattoo. The crescent moon vanishes beneath a swirling storm. Lightning scatters along my veins. Adorned in my own element, I reclaim myself.

I stumble across the miniature from the recesses of bad memories. I cloak it in shades of blue paint until all semblance of the fire dancer vanishes. Her hair cascades in deep, foamy surf, bringing to life my sapphic storm Goddess on the cusp of freedom. I baby pliers into position, careful not to scrape the illusory woodgrain at Her base as I crush candles in my talons. With a satisfying *smack*, the phallic fire careens off the model. My partner shaves away the stumps of wax left behind. Some become knots and gnarls in the wood, scars it will bear forever. Others we disguise as tufts of salt-bleached dune grass,

something new growing from something broken. I dare to dream there might exist an *After* to this unending nightmare.

But scarlet gashes still gleam on my forearm, and panic still hastens my heart.

*

I escape the daily dread, for just a little while. The Colorado sky waxes with magic. Jupiter blazes as bright as the gibbous, beckoning boldly enough to dazzle my astigmatism. I perch breathless over the telescope, gasping as my ruling planet's sharp, narrow bands fade into focus.

Fascinating, but not what I seek.

An army of four moons trail the pinstriped orb two by two. I neither know nor care which is Io. I hiss at them with all my teeth, flip a passing bird, sing uproariously as they slide out of the telescope's frame.

Then I turn the scope northward. I gaze upon the rings of Saturn and the craters of our moon. I watch Taurus spit a fireball and half a dozen lesser meteors. For just a moment, I believe I can *Banish* all my troubles half a solar system away.

Time ebbs by. The asteroid pseudo-moon slips from Earth's orbit, freeing me from its maddening grasp. My lungs begin to breathe easy. My mind begins to shift. My burns begin to fade but never vanish completely. Their stain clings to my flesh. And still I carry this knotted wound called *Grief* at the base of my throat, tender as a butterfly's wings. The softest caress cuts raw as heartbreak.

I doubt whether the torment will ever truly cease. But I am ruled by Jupiter, the ever-raging storm. I need not pine for an end to ravaged skies. I ache to mount the turbulent clouds, leaving a wave of righteous destruction in my wake while I bask in clear skies overhead.

*

In a year of too many murderous moons, I can scarcely fathom why I subject myself to two more. Despite the double echo of its name, the premise of the carnival entralls me: Luna Luna, a collaboration rescued from obscurity. It collects cobwebs for four forgotten decades in as many storage containers, only to be rediscovered and resurrected with love and care. Whimsical carousels spin in the

shapes of Keith Haring's bold hand. A ferris wheel adorned in Basquiat's iconic scrawls turns. Mirror domes immersed in Dali's surrealist eye ensnare me in infinite serenity.

The music flutters, the lights sparkle, the carnival rides spin round and round. The puppets dance, and I am dancing with them, savoring the manic breath of survival in my lungs.

I collect a moon from a frame, a runic cipher scratched around a red dot. Soon, it adorns my flesh in ink, a moon lost for a moon gained. The colors of Jupiter embrace my burns but do not conceal them. I bear my scars without shame.

*

It ends as it begins, with the moon bursting to full. An astigmatism-shattered hellscape of twilight headlights flash past as I remind myself not to dare touch my phone while driving, not even to check where the final supermoon will rise in the sky. The moon is still trying to kill me, but I am no longer trying to help it.

I clamber up the barricade of a bridge I once dreamt of casting myself off, revealing my folly at once. The black water ripples mere feet below, too close by far for vertigo to surge in my downward gaze. No moonlight reflects through the impenetrable clouds.

I howl to summon the supermoon forth, demanding it face me. My first shout ekes timidly from my throat. My second cascades across the storm surge. Heat lightning glows in response to my call, but the moon fails to emerge. "Not so *Super* after all," I proclaim. Its power is finally waning.

And the element rising is mine.

By Cole Vulgaris (they/them)

Cole Vulgaris (they/them/theirs) still struggles to claim the word survivor, but writing certainly helps. They are a proud genderqueer artist, activist, harm reductionist, and above all else a raging nerd.

LAND

when the floods finally came, we did not keep to our quarters:
lazing on satin sheets the countless nights that it took to reach
our tomorrow: patient as crossed palms, waiting demurely
for the dove or the olive branch; waiting
for the breeze and the waters to recede
below his ark.

we did not drift over the wild waters like dandelion seeds, embroidering the memory
of drowned flowers on our silken skin
with soft smiles for our fallen roots.

no, we learned to become the ocean,
to fight with the white foaming horses,
until we were retched forth, onto an unknown shore,
until neither the landing nor we
remembered the taste of the word soft.

and we were grateful, yes,
for the rough scratch of sand holding our backs,
the gradual ease of our breathing as we re-learned what it means to live,

but even as we relished the strange, new solidity
below us
within us
we wept for what we knew before,
that was lost
and could never come again.

By Hannah Woodvine (she/her)

Hannah Woodvine is an English Teacher and Poet living in Brighton, England. Her current work explores themes of destruction, disaster and how we adapt to survive. Her poetry has been published with The Anti-Misogyny Club, BlueBird, Dumbo Press and elsewhere.

 Songs of Survival 