

**The Mask**

**By Neha Mishra [1<sup>st</sup> Place]**

I anxiously stare at the mirror. I am ready.  
But wait, my skin tingles.  
Hush! It who shall not be named has arrived.  
Ready to embark on its next reign.  
Terrorize my every vein. I feel agonizing pain.  
It creeps over my soul as the slender fingers wrap around my shoulder.  
Like a snake entrapping my entire body  
Slowly crushing me. I stand paralyzed, barely clinging on to life.

I cogitate why I am not putting up a fight!  
In desperation, I look to my side.  
I see failure grinning wide.  
Self-doubt brushes my hair  
Bad intentions whisper in my ear  
Tied down with the ropes of despair  
I shake, with pure fear  
My feet are stuck, glued down by depressive thoughts.

Will I survive? I have before.  
How much can I take?  
I am sick of this to the core!  
Whom do I ask? Do I silently suffocate?  
I don't want to look desperate!  
Everyone else looks great.

Though, I can imagine their eyes filled with judgment when I ask for a hand.  
The ground turns into quicksand!  
I am sinking fast, desperate, for help is what I am.  
As a desert, I am barren.  
Stripped of the raindrops of comfort and acceptance to hydrate my soul  
My inner space is just an empty frame  
With no happiness, contentment, and will  
My roots are cracking. They cannot spread out anymore.  
Why can't someone free me from this cage so I can escape?

The doorbell rings breaking me out of its tormenting phase.  
Oh, it is time to go.  
Sayonara, it, who shall not be named. Time to put on my mask and put on the show.  
This show is fake as it always has been. Dripping with joy, satisfaction, and sake.  
I smile at my friends.  
But, masked behind my grin, I feel its sly hands resting on my shoulders.  
A steady pressure whose weight is increasing.  
A burden that I can never get rid of forever.

**Comes With Rules**

**By Cole Capriotti [2<sup>nd</sup> Place]**

Being male comes with rules,  
Being male comes with the rule that I have to know sports more than I know how to heal  
Being male comes with the rule that I have to get my hands messy and not confess how I feel;  
Being male comes with the rule that I can't be real with the ones I love;  
Being male comes with the rule that I'm just like her ex because "all men are the same";  
Being male comes with the rule that I have to compress my emotions into a tiny box never to be seen  
Because being male comes with rules

Being male comes with self evaluation  
Being male comes with crippling expectation;  
Being male comes with "Be a man" a phrase that makes me want to tear myself apart;  
Being male comes with a forced silence as you struggle  
Because being male comes with rules .

Being male comes with the rule that says I can't have anxiety because I didn't serve my country  
Being male comes with the rule that if I am depressed I am weak  
Being male come with the rule that I can't cry and if I seek out help then I am pathetic;  
Being male comes with the rule that I can't start a poem with Being MENTALLY ILL comes with rules  
Because being male comes with rules .

Being male comes with the rule that I have to accept that I am destined to be one of 22.4 per 100,000;  
Being male comes with the rule that only then are my fellow men allowed to be empathic,  
Because being male comes with predetermined rules.

**Silent Chaos**

**By Megha Sood [3<sup>rd</sup> Place]**

*There is a crack, a crack in everything  
That's how the light gets in --Leonard Cohen*

Sometimes there are hushed whispers under bated breath  
sometimes there is a cacophony  
drowning minds—  
leaving us numb and frozen.

Sometimes there is a constant irk  
a feeling of being lost in the crowd  
a deep soliloquy of the soul:  
not heard or even spoken aloud.

Sometimes we are trying to hide the grief  
storing our sorrow neatly between the folds  
of an even pleated dress  
trying to give structure to our broken days.

Sometimes we look with bleary eyes  
for a hand, a face, a hug  
that stops us from shredding and ripping apart.  
Living with an unwelcome guest  
trapped in an unwilling body,  
a lone fight right from the start.

Sometimes like a loud thud  
an old chestnut breaks down  
opens itself to the wild  
wild and numb to the core for everyone to see.

*Acceptance is a sacred offering not just another fallacy*

Sometimes we love those frail moments of life  
trying to keep darkness at bay  
reclaiming those broken pieces  
that once made us whole.

Sometimes we fight the darkness looming inside us  
trying hard to keep away those nasty ghouls  
Sometimes we feed those black dogs  
lying in the slumber, growing and scratching,  
leaving marks of gnarls and gashes on our soul.

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Sometimes we split and splinter ourselves  
into a million facades, still counting as one.  
Sometimes even a pale face  
holds mystery for a closed palm for eons.

Sometimes silence screams the loudest—  
waiting for a patient heart                      to listen  
just for once.

**Metamorphosis**

**By Lexie Manion [4<sup>th</sup> Place]**

If it wasn't for your oh-so-careful charismatic checking out, like a hurried guest with heavy luggage and a heart so vacant,  
I may have come out of my lowly cocoon sooner.  
You see, I wrapped myself up in this sea of blankets to watch the TV show I have seen for the hundredth time and pick at the remnants of food from takeout boxes for the tenth time,  
Surrounded by an oasis of suffering in a meek attempt to cope with your scarcity of hope.  
I was trying to protect myself.  
Your gaze overlooks my present fighting self just to undermine my future potential,  
As if your departure from compassion was non-consequential.

You pick and choose who receives kindness.  
What I wish you would understand is that we do not pick and choose illness.  
We are given this life from nature and nurture.  
It's a curse and a blessing, but most importantly, a choiceless matter.  
My nature is empathy, running deep in the earth like roots of a tree — far and wide as the naked eye could see.  
Perhaps nurture could teach you some valuable lessons.

I, the enigma of your pointed shame,  
Fight for an end to this; for I am the window that emits the light colorizing a once dismal room.  
Where you cast shadows on who I am,  
I will splash the vibrancy of hope on all that we can be.  
I will emerge anew.  
I will butterfly for me — not for you.  
I hear new words from old souls: "*I understand*" and "*I believe in you*".

I emerge, wings timidly wavering and wilted.  
Give me time and I will bravely open up, my arms speckled with good four-letter words protecting my delicate yet daring heart.  
"*Home*", "*heal*" and "*hope*" paint the cocooned a brand new day.  
Let this be a lesson to those battling in the darkness:  
*We will fly again.*

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**FREE**

**By Lisa Marie Bettencourt [5<sup>th</sup> Place]**

You may not want to ask me what's up  
You're not sure what you really want to know  
I may say I want to give up  
I might say things you don't want to hear  
It might make you nervous  
It might bring you fear  
You may not know what to say  
I may catch you off guard  
You may not want to stay  
I hope you will try to understand  
And to want to help  
To maybe hold my hand  
I hope you will try to see what I need  
And want to stand by me  
To help me succeed  
It's never easy to help someone out  
Especially if you don't know  
What the pain is really about  
You will never know unless you ask  
Just try to reach out  
And see behind the mask  
Its not that I want to hide  
Its just very difficult  
To let someone inside  
I am afraid if you were to see  
You will not want to know  
What's going on with me  
Its not that it's easy to share  
Just difficult to believe  
There are people who care  
So I will try to do my best  
To share my feelings  
Even when I'm depressed  
Sometimes just being there  
Is the one thing I need  
Just knowing someone does care  
Being there beside me  
Is all I need...  
...to be free

**Our Family**

**By Susan Wagner [6<sup>th</sup> Place]**

An eruption of shame and  
Red heat rises to my face

After whispered words:  
*It's always the mother.*

*He needs parental discipline,  
Natural consequences,*

As if we haven't tried.

We must explain him, detain him  
Restrain him, retrain him.

Words spew - neighbors, teachers  
Extended family members, who say

*It's your fault because you're the mom.*

Our small home shakes, our feet  
Stumble, our lips plead – help.

Our lava meets the world's sand  
Our glass house is fragile

We have no bad children  
No bad parents, just illness.

**Your Smile Never Ceases to Exist as Part of Who You Are  
By Bryan Franco [7<sup>th</sup> Place]**

Remember way back when your smile was your calling card?  
When you smiled for more than happy?  
When you smiled when were embarrassed?  
When you smiled through a lie?  
When you liked to smile?  
When you used your teeth for more than chewing?

Remember when you were always on?  
Then, you wanted to dim the lights a little.  
Attention felt like unattainable high expectations.  
Then, you reverted back to wallflower.  
You were on vacation when you were present,  
and no one knew but you.  
Silence was a place of comfort.

Then, you crossed a threshold  
when people started ending sentences  
in conversations with you with question marks  
that would never have had question marks in writing.  
Then, you stopped going barefoot around family  
due to the myriad broken eggshells  
they left on the ground  
because it became mandatory  
to walk on eggshells in your presence.

You felt hobbled by the unwritten rule that  
everyone else is allowed to stand up for themselves  
but you must sit in the corner like Dennis The Menace  
as punishment for breathing.

But, when you breathed you existed.  
Sometimes, the act of existence  
is a form of standing up for yourself  
even if you are unaware.  
Unwritten rules are unwritten  
and thusly incapable of being set in stone.  
The only things that are truly set in stone  
is that every human is composed of blood skin and bones,  
and every single person decides how to use their teeth.

**Inheritance**

**By J. Lewis [8<sup>th</sup> Place]**

From my father I've inherited green eyes,  
and a predisposition for depression.  
Others confuse us as simply "too sensitive."  
He pondered idea after idea, so many

Scribbled thoughts in journals and on index cards  
about life lived and lives unlived and mistakes made and unmade.

I would lie with him on his office floor, if I could,  
underneath the examination table.  
I'd cradle in the fetal position he  
assumed when life became too much.

No doctors to help the Doctor,  
hushed tones of "hypoglycemia," whispered around,  
as a way to explain the whole incident away. Again.  
In the old times – Before Prozac

Have you ever just laid there?  
When the world was too much. You can tell me,

I'm good at keeping secrets. I'm right there, on that linoleum floor  
with him now. Cold and speckled gray on gray shades,  
going on for days and days. Because, really, we're always there,  
with our shared DNAs.

Laying beneath the table, next to its four metal pedals that shift,  
up or down, or tilt to or fro  
and here we are,  
below, on this rather down type day.

The floor of the examination room holds my weight with his,  
I'd hoped to avoid getting to know the patterns  
so closely. Most people only glance it from above,  
but never truly know it, as they are busy

looking up. But dad and I have been down here  
for ages. Forever. Waiting for nothing  
Waiting  
for it to pass.

Later we will walk out into the forest,  
and feel alive again, surrounded by green friends

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with their trunks upright, who simply accept us  
for who we are. In thought and  
body, and all the ideas that existed  
inside us, existed after all, even if  
only on paper, even if scribbled out,  
  
even if we cease.

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**Spare tire**

**By Rescue Poetix [9<sup>th</sup> Place]**

When I was 7 I had a favorite top  
blue puffy cap sleeves, white panel just under blue rounded collar with  
purple and yellow flowers, green vines  
connecting them shoulder to shoulder, disappearing into those epic puffs of power

Under the panel, separated by the smallest of frill blue kept going,  
that rich blue that skirts the world between royal and navy  
Between the panel and ...what *papi* called "My spare tire"  
That little peek of flesh, from under the blue that changed EVERYTHING

I remember when that love turned to dismay then hatred  
for that blue giving away tender secrets  
Of an imperfect 7-year-old

Botanical gardens with extended family, strangers scattered everywhere,  
thrown away flowers seeking to connect  
structured forced natural things, that have no business growing together  
Cross pollinating before our very eyes

I wore my favorite top... What girl wouldn't?

Stretching tall after the long ride, standing next to *mami*  
I had grown since the last time I wore it  
Others in groups talking and laughing, *papi* caught my stretch  
That blue riding up, leaving 7-year-old self-worth vulnerability bare, tender

He laughed and pointed ... "Look at your spare tire" He cackled ... "Spare tire!"  
Conversations seemed to stop, nowhere to hide  
Sweltering Black top at my feet, undulating metal behind me  
Human bones doing nothing, but staring... and staring

While he - My protector - And provider - Joked at my Tenderness

In that moment, with the universe swirling in cruel lessons of compassion  
I lost the naive belief, that I was supposed to be protected  
Unable to process, I cried, like a 7-year-old

Hating myself and my spare tire, hating him more for his cruelty  
Hating everyone for doing nothing, hating every bit of flesh from ankles to forehead  
Hating and crying, pulling down the blue fabric that betrayed and mocked me

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Gone was the joy of being among flowers, of blending with those who found joy  
In ignoring the forced narrative of nature, under glass, surrounded by steel  
Joy seeped out into the dirt and cement and black top  
All I could think about was ... "My spare tire"

I grew up from that day; survived various cruelties of childhood  
Thrived with a spare tire ... "You're shaped funny"  
"You're well proportioned. Don't hide your curves."  
Childhood trauma uninvited and invasive, adjusting. Always adjusting.

Even when no one sees, alone on the couch, images of crop tops, across the screen

**Crazy**

**By Stacy Carchman [10<sup>th</sup> Place]**

Mind racing,  
Walking and Pacing,  
Heart thumping,  
Panic, Panic,  
Call the paramedic,  
But it is a false alarm,  
I am in no danger or harm,  
Is it all in my mind?  
My thoughts unravel and unwind.  
Why am I here?  
What did I do?  
Throbbing pain in my head, I feel misled,  
Tie her down and watch her squirm,  
As helpless as a worm.  
Feel like an actor in a play,  
Surrounded by characters,  
All different in every way.  
Why do they watch me?  
Why do they stare?  
Do they think I don't care..  
They mock me, they laugh  
Their remarks cut me in half.  
But they hold the key,  
To my freedom.  
Locked behind closed doors,  
Like a rat in a cage,  
Walking the halls in rage.  
Weeks came and went, Time to go.  
I am changed forever, A moment in time,  
I will never forget until the day I die.