

My Survival Story

by Megha Sood (1st Place)

The slow cleaving in my backbone
the seamless transformation:
branching into my thousand selves
Like a sapling breaking
from the blind seed
I'm sprouting, I am thriving.

Growing like a Medusa
this fecundity of myself,
breaking out into
thousand versions of me
morphing into shapes
perfecting the art of topiary.

Like a reflection of the summer sun
shining into a million versions of me,
on shards of broken mirror
blessing them with its apricity.

I'm the war cry, the mortal fear
residing behind the enemy lines
The lava, the primordial gel
creating life so sublime,
I'm the knowledge in the verse
in the smattering cacophony of your mind.

With inked breaths and walnut skin
boisterous, unfettered and uncontrolled,
Walking barefoot on this graveled path
unspooling life's fears in its intimate corridors.

My pain impaled on the stars in the nightly sky
I shine through my pulverized skin,
The broken pieces I foraged together
to make a whole of me

an untrammelled beauty within.

This fecundity is my survival extinct
to handle the plethora of emotions
life throws at me,
Undulating between the proximity and prosody of pain:
I'm learning.
Yes, I'm growing.

Untitled

by Jennifer McGraw (2nd Place)

she set foot into the Storm for the first time in a while
the song of sunflowers filled her ears with melodic tones
her nose with it's blissful, warm summer scent
and her brain with ease

she no longer had to be afraid of the roaring thunder
and flashing strikes of lightning
instead of being hesitant, she walked with confidence
for that the Storm was not going to terrorize her mind anymore

you see, she has grown and changed
and pushed through doors and broken down walls
she has undergone a character development; a journey
she is not the same girl last week, last month, or last year

there was a time
when the Storm was able to snatch her of her identity
her sanity
and her mental wellbeing
but not anymore

she walked into this Storm and she felt free
free from her old self
free from that last chapter she was stuck on
she was just free

the rain splashed onto the ground
onto her hair, on her clothes, on her being
and it was refreshing where it used to be troublesome
her sunflower song
and her stronger mind, body, and soul
helped her see that Storms can only cause damage if you let it

Silence
by Michelle Belfiore (3rd Place)

Down.
Into the darkness.
Hands reaching for me
But no.
I don't reach back.

Further.
Into the darkness
I go.
It's all I know.

Alone.
Into the darkness.
Gasping for air.
None
To be found.

Afraid.
In the darkness.
Not sure
When
If
Light will be seen
Again.

Silence.

Up.
Into the light.

Hands reaching for me
But no, help isn't needed.

Slowly.
Into
The light.
I am
The light.
I am
The fire.

The fire is
Within me.

Up.
Slowly.

Into the light.
Things are
Brighter.
Things are
Clearer.
Things have
Hope.

What goes
Down
Can
Come Up.
Higher
Than ever before.

Hello my name is: Resilience
by Edward Ballo (4th Place)

I am a child, or am I the parent, or am I their spouse
I shop, caretake, and provide support
It's 10am and she is sleeping

Don't upset her
I must be her favorite
Pray nothing goes wrong

Open the refrigerator
Butter, ketchup, cold pizza
Electricity shut off again
It's 1pm and she is sleeping

Achieve to better yourself
Achieve to escape
Achieve perfection and all will be fine

My arm goes through a glass door
Dishes fly, words too
The child did wrong
It's 4pm and she is back sleeping

You are too uptight I'm told
I know no different
Uptight is my protector

You achieve, you move forward
Others parent, feed, teach
The journey has value, you have value
It's 7pm, I know she is safe; I think she is sleeping

I am growing, I am growing up
Coping skills, education, relationships, independence
I am not alone, I am not unique

It's 2020, I am not sleeping
I am alive
Thank-you my friend, I didn't catch your name
Hello my name is: Resilience

Metamorphosis
by Karen Jung (5th Place)

There are moments and days
When my Spirit struggles to breathe
And feels trapped inside this dark hole
With no tunnel to escape
And nowhere to scream
My eyes become blind
As despair seeps into my brain
And loneliness captures my heart

...and just when I'm on the brink of crumbling...

I paint rainbow colors
Across the canvas of my mind's eye
To cover the hues of black, blue, and gray
That seep from the depths of my soul
And spread like ever-growing spiderwebs
That threaten to imprison my sense of Hope

...and when my rainbow colors start to fade...

I raise my shield of Faith
And shout words of protest
To ward off the enemies of my mind
For they speak partial truths and twisted lies
That try to poison the sanctity
Of who I was born to be

...and when my shield starts to shudder...

I enshroud my Spirit
With a halo of God's Grace
And dance to the rhythms
Of the sun and the moon
For I am like the butterfly
Who has broken free
From her coffin-like cocoon
To bask in the beauty of the Universe
And soar with the winds of Peace

Visibility

by Cooper Kidd (6th Place)

Oftentimes it is the fact that I am trans that makes me visible,
Thankfully not a mockery or a disgrace,
But visible enough to be vocal.
I used to say that being trans was my superpower,
But that was before I knew my superpower exists in wholeness,
Not in silos or compartments.
My superpower now consists of all of me,
Not just parts pieced together haphazardly like bits of trash speckling the Philly streets,
Loose, torn, fragmented, never still.
But sadness is like that sometimes,
Like a caged lion trying to escape,
Trying to roar with no sound,
Attempting to mask its frustration and cries for help.
Time capsules help though,
Transform me, motivate me, move me,
Allows me to remember better times exist,
Glimpses into a future untold but omnipresent.
Like a ghost I am neither here nor there,
Cutting in and out of lives, situations, places,
Striving to stay,
But unable not unwilling.
Sometimes though I transform,
Caged animals sing sometimes too you know,
Sing loud and proud,
Unmasking and rejoicing in freedom that has at long last come.

Cosmic Revelation
by Sacha Batra (7th Place)

As I surpassed the line that separates heaven and earth,
The universe whispered that life on earth can be cruel,
But I will guide you to find beauty within and evolve,
Like a lotus in dark waters.

My soul grew restless.
For many years, I screamed at the barriers,
That pulled me, into, a starless dark sky.
It pushed me to an inconceivable edge.
I wished to jump into that darkness with the delusion of achieving eternal sleep and everlasting peace.

It was at that pivotal moment, when I felt most broken,
The universe felt it was time to intervene.
It lifted the dark veil to reveal the light that was always inside me.

Soon, each drop of cosmic ray granted by the stars,
Surrounded me with a blazing glow.

Through the radiance, I saw my truth; a soul that was gifted a life of darkness to overcome in order to discover my own light.

D.I.D.

by Jodie Intilli (8th Place)

I'm a did
made up of multiple parts.
Sarah, 8, 12, and Tommy
to name a few.
We were born out of insanity;
torture, neglect-
created to survive an unbearable childhood.

DISSOCIATIVE.

Escape the rolodex of memories;
his sadistic games,
my mind would leave my body.
My mind was all that fled.
My body-
it lay lifeless, captive prey.

IDENTITY.

Twelve,
Jodala,
boy,
girl.
All of us grieve.
We surrender to become protectors.

DISORDER.

Confusion,
fear and suffering-
chaos.

D.I.D.-

ultimately a label
to tell the world my mind
is undone.
Crazy I am not.
I try to piece back the fragments;
find integration,
Become one.
I am a did but I am not done.

Signs

by Aparaajit Sriram (9th Place)

Curling at the edges
a blue post-it on a dirty window
'No analysis will save you.'

The A train hurtles from 125th to 59th street
Space finally to move, breathe

But I am still at 168th
What had I missed? Why had I rushed?
Am I safe? Am I sure?

Dancing again between steaming grates
sidling by trash cans, ducking overhangs
Gyros for \$3.99, spiced chicken charring the air

I can rack my brains
and replay images past
all while smiling at you

OCD is watching and doing at the same time
Consciousness and self-consciousness
An edifice in two places,
with too many moving parts

A glitch, a catch,
vigilance off-kilter
And I feel for feelings felt

It is a delicious itch itched, compulsive checking

But what is it to push through obsessive doubt?
I cast my eyes down to my half-copy of *Irrational Man*
No spine, no cover, a slab of text

To press forward while
the muscle of memory pulls me
back

'No analysis will save you.'

The good the bad and the mental illness

by Shelley Pickles (10th Place)

Being in this place is fun sometimes: the stories.. the quirks.. the inappropriate jokes that only I hear.

other times its nightmare.. a visual minefield, that I tried to forget exists, one no cliche aphorisms can soothe.

You can sleep but that only brings more darkness and passing of a man-made illusion that serves as a biological clock

Dancing on the end of a pin in an attempt to sew yourself back together again
Other times you can hear the drop of a pin from self-isolation

Times like that you have to make your own escape from this collagen fiber enclosure
That is meant to protect you.

Whilst doing something that's meant to better yourself, you might find a light-like Christmas lights or the light of a lighthouse guiding you away from the rocks.
It's beautiful but only exists in those minutes of wonder. is that why my heart rate thuds faster?
It's beautiful but so alien and unexpected

The light is part of something a person said they loved about you. They loved it so much they enclosed it in a box filled with pink love hearts that twinkle in the light.

Could that be my light