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Vázquez-Valarezo Poetry Award

Prizewinners

Spring 2018

;

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Santangelo, Anthony. ";" (2018). *Vázquez-Valarezo Poetry Award*.
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I dedicate this to my best friend who I will call Julia. We met from the swim team last year.

The first time Julia and I went out she got drunk and threw up.
I thought she was just a good girl who partied without a care,
But soon it became me who held her hair.
We were friends who went out, had fun,
But she kept drinking long after I was done.
Our swim coach gave one last chance,
Meanwhile her friends partied and danced,
Julia was alone, and hurt.
So I stayed with her like teammates do,
With tough times we had each other to talk to.
One night, she looked especially down,
Everyone went out so no one was around,
I asked what's wrong
And she said "I think I have depression."

We related because our families aren't close,
But compared to hers, my situation wasn't in the same boat.
She had dealt with these feelings for years,
And now faced her demons and fears
Because the alcohol had been an escape,
Her way to forget and numb the pain.
Now she walked a tightrope
Between finding her stroke
And her way to cope.

When Julia was the most Julia,
She was on the block for a race
But she felt the crowd's stare on a new place-
Her scars.
There's no room to hide in swimming.
The pressure to cut time,
So dangerous a tool,
She considered cutting her time
Outside the pool.

Julia had to see a counselor for her drinking problem,
But in appointments always fell solemn.
Years of failed "family counseling" left her with a bad taste.

No one spoke out, the whole thing ended a waste
Because they were too scared to say anything to *his* face.
Sometimes she saw counselors for “troubled kids” in high school,
But they didn’t really care or even know who was who.
So why would she trust a new counselor who didn’t know her at all?
The further she dug the more Julia would withdraw,
Or her answers were noncommittal
Because the worst case scenario was going to a hospital.

Mental illness comes entwined with unspoken stigma.
We call them crazy because they seem like enigmas.
Before Julia I would naively say, “Oh you’re sad,
Go eat some ice cream and you won’t feel so bad,”
But that’s only what works for me.
We don’t share the same brain chemistry.
Just being sad is not really depressed.
At its worst you feel nothing, a total loss of interest,
An overwhelming numbness no matter what you do,
There’s no simple solution to be happy on cue.

Stress and changes kept Julia up at night,
Dreams she couldn’t brush off or pretend were alright.
Swimming from life, sleep should be a break,
But nightmares became worse than being awake.
Insomnia and depression, a dangerous cycle.
Wakeful nights made her sad, and sad made her tired.
Escaping this trap, her only desire.

On the last Friday of classes before Christmas Break,
We both had a paper, we stayed up late.
I left for an hour, just for a nap,
And when I woke I missed texts in my lapse:
“I need your help. This time it’s really bad.”
I ran to her dorm, but now she wanted to be alone,
So I waited outside Seminary in the bitter cold,
Begging,
Until a shell of her came down,
Took me to her room in silence.
She wept, words choked by despair
I had her lie with me as she stared
At the ceiling,
Before my stomach dropped, I’ll never forget that feeling
Of chills.

I saw her desk covered in pills.
And she told me she had already started taking them.
She still tells me in my nightmares.
It amounted to only a stomach ache,
But if I hadn't out-touched her in this race,
There would be no time left to swim, laugh, breath,
December 18th would have been her last meet.

Three weeks before our conference meet,
No contact, a regular race, the accident was a freak.
She fractured her rib,
Doctor's orders: Julia must stay in bed,
In her mind, bedrest's as good as dead.
Every movement, every breath caused her pain.
Only she knew the reason for the break.
That bone was prone to injury,
It had been damaged before,
By her father, the original cause of her misery,
And those memories now felt all-the-more sore.
As a child her dad would abuse and harm her,
And to this day she sees herself as the monster,
Thinking about what 8-year-old Julia should have done to stop his assault,
So let me remind everyone:
The victim is never at fault.

The situation was too much,
The timing, the stress, the buildup,
I had to act or something would erupt.
I met with a coordinator of Title Nine
And left that room finally thinking things would be fine.
They sent Julia away and told me they would find her help,
But that promise didn't come through.
As mad as it makes me, I understand what Augie administration did;
It's not their job to save the life of some kid.
Suicide and depression are considered bad publicity,
But even if they swept it under the rug, it's part of *our* history
That I can't let go unwritten,
Because too often these people feel forced to stay hidden.
Or maybe their obituary catches your attention,
But that's too late!
If you or a loved one is self-conscious for how you think,
I've got an idea everyone needs to weigh:
Now is the time for it be okay not to be okay!

Stigma says Julia is crazy,
And if she needs treatment for some sadness
That she's weak.
I don't care who you are,
But if you live through that hell,
Then you are strong to me.
No one can make mental illness *poof*, go away.
The brain is an organ,
Like the others, it can go astray.
If the problem's not recognized,
It can't get treated.
But while all sides are afraid to speak,
We definitely can't beat it.

I know deep in my heart that regardless of race, color, or creed,
Or spectrum of mental anxiety,
That everyone deserves respect and equality.
We can all be kinder and less judgmental.
You don't know what's happening behind someone's curtains
Or how hard it is to carry their burdens.
You'd have to look closely,
But we're all busy with our own problems mostly.

As for Julia, she's back walking among you,
Except now she proudly sports my favorite tattoo.
It's a semicolon on her scarred right wrist
That if you weren't watching you'd probably miss.
In the moment of writing a semicolon,
The author could have chosen to end her sentence,
But she chose to continue.
She's still recovering because it takes time to undo damage,
But if anyone is tough enough I know she can manage.
It's been a windy path that she still climbs and struggles,
But I'll always be faithful:
Happiness is the only endpoint for this battered angel.