

## 2019 Classical Literature Scholarship—First Place

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### After the Storm

Battle scars. That's what I call the pale lines that snake over my shoulders and thighs. They are reminders of the wars I've fought on the field of my own mind, the demons I've defeated, and the things I have survived. As much as they now serve as a symbol of those battles, they weren't always that way. Once they were dripping red instead of pale white, an emblem of my seemingly unbearable internal pain.

*"Endure, and save yourself for happier times."*

With the memory of the blood oozing from my arms and legs comes these words whispering in the back of my mind, spoken by Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*, to his men as they begin to lose heart. Like me, Aeneas almost certainly was covered in scars. Though his battles were fought on the fields of Troy rather than in his mind, and with a sword rather than with small white pills and persistence, I still feel some sense of kinship to the scarred hero standing before his men and telling them to endure. *"Put aside your fear and grief,"* he says just a few lines before. *"Someday, perhaps, it will help to remember these troubles as well."*

Sometimes I wish that in the midst of my internal war I had remembered these words as well as I do now. When I would take the blade to my skin, enduring to save myself for a better time was the last thing on my mind. The cool numbing steel followed by the stench of iron was more akin to Dido throwing herself on the fire in order to avoid the pain of loss than it was to the odyssey of the hero Aeneas.

But in the days since I have thrown away the pins and blades, I have begun to find great solace in the story of Aeneas. I find myself tremendously inspired by the way Aeneas handles

moving on from the traumas he experienced in the war, especially compared to other major figures such as Achilles or Odysseus. While the other heroes of the war walked away weighed down with their traumas like ships heavy with the spoils of war, Aeneas was able to take the weight of what he experienced and use it as a sword to fight the battles that awaited him in the future. More than that, Aeneas transformed the poison of his pain into an antidote for others, something that separates him from Homer's heroes. "*Through pain I've learned to comfort suffering men,*" he meekly tells Dido.

I have learned from Aeneas that enduring my trials well is just the first step to overcoming hardship. Surviving the war is necessary, but it is where we go from there that defines us. It has been almost a year since I've cut my own skin. I still find myself at war with the chemicals in my brain sometimes, but ultimately I am in the stage of my trials where moving forward requires action outside of myself. I have endured and saved myself for a better time, now it is my calling to learn through my pain to comfort and uplift others. Like Aeneas, my scars are no longer a reminder of my pain, loss, and shortcomings, but rather a memorial to my survival, a reminder to others that living is possible even when life crumbles down like the walls of Troy.

We don't all have the blood of a Roman god in us like Aeneas did, but even mere human beings have remarkable potential. We are stronger than we know and I truly believe that every single person has the ability to endure and survive the war whether inside or out. It is with the help of Aeneas that I have come to terms with my trials. My mind and body were akin to the bloodied fields of Troy, but now I am sailing towards my highest potential with legions of support behind me. The temptation to be like Odysseus and look out only for myself is strong, but such siren songs are silent compared to the divine calling I have been granted by my

experiences. It is with my battle scars that I am building my own Rome as Aeneas built his--to be a haven of peace and trust, a place where I can turn my past suffering into comfort for others and help others “endure and save themselves for happier times” as Aeneas helped me to do.