

THE THICK OF THE IN-BETWEEN

SARABANDE WRITING LABS, VOL. 16

SARABANDE WRITING LABS

An Arts Education Program from Sarabande Books

Sarabande Writing Labs is an arts education initiative created by Louisville-based, nonprofit publisher Sarabande Books. We partner with social service organizations to promote writers in under-resourced communities through free workshops, literary events, and publication.

Visit our website for photos, digital downloads, and upcoming events: www.sarabandebooks.org/swl

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The essays collected in this volume were written during a six-week workshop series for woman-identifying and nonbinary writers held at the Sarabande Books office in NuLu and taught by writer and columnist Minda Honey.

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INTRODUCTION

by Minda Honey

In Louisville we need more. We need more writers. We need more readers. We need more show-up-at-literary-events type people. And we need more programs like Sarabande Writing Labs. So many of the writers who offered up six weeks of their time this summer were nearly lost to the swirl and turmoil that is life. To an everyday starved of creative endeavors. To not hearing, sometimes not even once, that they are writers, that they are worthy to be at the table, and that there exist multitudes that are hungry for their stories.

So, thank you for picking up this collection, for savoring these words, and for being that little bit more a city like ours needs to keep all our literary lives living.

Thank you to Sarabande for making all this possible.

And thank you to my writers for being vulnerable, for believing you could, and then proving it on the page.

Keep writing,
Minda Honey

ELBOWS AND KNEES

Andy Radmacher

The blurry image from the 1980s is me. Sitting in my turtle sandbox, mixing a potion of dirt and intentions. Berries and sunshine. Sticks thrown down deep into the pot; bones to be read.

I wait.

Bangs and a leotard. Sneakers. Blue and red striped tube-socks. I appear deeply rooted in myself. serious. Intense. Looking.

In the almost forty years since that picture was taken I weave in and out of the familiarity of that grounded feeling. I chase moments of confidence the way children chase bubbles: head up, eyes wide and with serious disregard for the concrete curb that inevitably jumps up to scrape my knee. Chasing wonderment is a dangerous pastime that turns humble moment after bruised ego, head over foot, tumbling down the hill.

Midwifery is the practice of being humble, the art of doing nothing well. Waiting. Listening. Midwives hold confidence in our bodies as we hold space for other bodies to bring whole humans earthside. The calm of a cold, 2 a.m., starry night drive into the world with the hopes of meeting someone new is made of the same seriousness that is settled on my face sitting in that old, turtle sandbox.

I found my confidence as a midwife as I sat tucked up under a pedestal sink, waiting for my client to know when to push. There is a picture of this moment too, it's a poorly composed snapshot: beige tile, yellow light. Most of what you can see of me are elbows and knees. My head is cocked to the side, eyes closed. Attentive. That day, I was learning to trust the process. And I have welcomed baby after baby into this world sticky and smelling of travel from the other side.

But sometimes babies leave us, like bubbles that burst before we can catch them on the crinkled circle at the end of the plastic wand. Dreams are lost. Midwives try to hold space for grieving. Theirs. Our own. Scooping it up in our pockets. Confidence draining from our hearts as grief and sorrow fill space.

Babies that leave take with them the security that we are grounded by gravity. Black holes bend time and space—the ache is so dense no light can escape.

Grief acts on the scaffolding of our consciousness. The belief that there is goodness in the world becomes slick and elusive. Solid ground falls away and footing shifts. Instead of protective beams holding up the arch of the roof, hope doesn't spring eternal.

I thought I had failed. I still think I failed. I know I did not fail. I know failure is not a thing.

But my cognitive knowing and the feeling in my cells are in constant opposition to each other. My confidence rejects me on the days when I come crawling for a crumb of

reassurance.

In offering, I hold out my hands: remembering the swirling sheen of rainbow colors that existed on that perfectly round, glistening bubble. I am working to make peace with what I can, with what is mine.

And sometimes, I get a call or text message from a former client: are you still practicing?

Late-night requests for reassurance: the baby will come.

You know how to do this.

I see you.

I miss them, the people.

My clients. Their babies. Their homes. I miss the structure of my life, the stretch for flexibility as I try to anticipate the unknowable. I miss accepting invitations into these private spaces.

Because in those quiet, laborious moments I know that I can sit in the thick of the in-between.

I am learning that the stillness that holds my confidence was rooted in my being long before grief and trauma told me I wasn't good enough.

Today, I will mix a potion with grace, hawthorn and dewy slugs, to remind me that the path from then to now means there is a path forward.

Stars blink, and light is refracted. Gravity is acting upon us, and grains of goodness are mixed into potions and grounded in moments spent in the belly of a turtle sandbox.

LOVE LIKE A KENTUCKY PAWPAW TREE

Amanda Townsell

The morning light was coming in the large window of our studio apartment. Golden rays highlighting the plants in the window. I rolled over and moved the dogs out of the way as I looked at my partner who was already awake and playing on his phone. I paused for a second. I knew that I could not take back the words that I was about to say. Out of my mouth spilled, “Don’t you feel like we have just become roommates? Don’t you feel like we fell out of love?”

My partner used to tell me a story about how his mother liked to buy him African Violets, and he would kill each one and would have to replace it so his mother didn’t know the original plant had dried up from lack of water and attention. He talked about how African Violets were too fussy. I related to this story as I had once killed my sister’s fern by forgetting to water it for a couple of weeks despite working out next to the plant in the basement. I had failed to see it dying right in front of my face. We both preferred low-maintenance spider plants and succulents.

Gardening was a thing that my family did. We grew things out of the dirt. We grew plants, vegetables, and herbs that we used for food and to nourish those in our lives. I learned

from an early age that plants are healing, and, to this day, one of my favorite coping skills is putting my hands in the dirt and bringing forth new growth and life.

Our friends and family thought we had a wonderful relationship. They didn't see all those empty alcohol bottles in the recycling bin. They didn't see nights spent not touching and laying on separate sides of our bed on our phones while the space between us grew wider and wider. Didn't see me dealing with the loss of my sister by laying on the bathroom floor sobbing and refusing to eat while my partner tried to figure out how to make me okay again. Didn't see the impact of the two surgeries my partner had, each recovery process creating more distance between us. Didn't see the drive home from holiday events where we listened to talk radio because we simply had nothing left to say to each other.

Somewhere along the way, we stopped growing. Our relationship got rootbound and filled the entire apartment until neither of us had enough oxygen. We strangled on the lack of nutrients and started wilting when we saw each other.

So, when I said to my partner, "Don't you feel like we have just become roommates? Don't you feel like we fell out of love?" he got upset and escaped to the kitchen to make coffee, making visible the distance between us. We didn't talk until the coffee was done. Until our love was done. Without realizing it, we had slowly let our relationship grow neglected and wither away.

During the divorce, I took cuttings of all the plants he

was taking with him. When I arrived home from work each day, I would water the plants while I wept, my tears mixing in the water, my pain feeding the plants. I slowly began to treat myself like the plants. I got on an eating schedule and made sure I was getting enough water. I made sure I went out into the sunlight. I gave myself space as we all know that plants need plenty of room for their roots to grow. I let my roots get stronger and more resilient. My leaves flourished. I learned to take care of myself and not rely on others to do so. I was reminded that sometimes we must prune away the dead parts to allow for space for new growth and to keep the entire plant from dying.

Not too long ago I started dating someone new, who also uses plants as a love language. I go on hikes with him to find and identify plants. We recently discovered a patch of Kentucky pawpaw trees in one of our favorite spots. The pawpaw tree grows roots that connect underground to other pawpaw trees, and they share nutrients and help each other grow. I think about this when we lay in bed together because we are always touching, our limbs intertwined, giving each other the love to grow and expand, creating our own root system, nourishing ourselves and this partnership.

GRATIFICATION PROCRASTINATION

Valerie Hudson

I have a drawer filled with neatly folded bras and underwear. Not true. I wish I did. Instead, they are all balled up and thrown into a drawer that is never totally closed. It's full of lacy underwear and bra sets with names that promise excitement. Who wouldn't want to take their forty-something boobs, boost them up and let them plunge like a waterlog ride? Not me. The sets sit, tags on, waiting patiently for me to break them out. Such a simple way to feel good, to say, hey, I have an okay butt; it deserves some cheeky undies. Nope doesn't happen. I go for the old, stretched out, should only be worn during my period panties every time. It's best to wait for something special; the perfect moment.

My girls—the Twins—don't have this problem. They can be found at any time in their nicest clothes. They run through our fields, wade through the creek, or visit the cows bare-foot in tiaras and ball gowns. They don't choose the lesser because tomorrow might be better. They enjoy the moment no matter how mundane or how much laundry will have to be done tomorrow.

I want to encourage this behavior, but I catch myself

stomping down on their joy, “Stop being so silly!” “Do you really need to sing right now? Will you two just calm down!”

Those lit up faces, red from laughter, will radiate gloom back at me. My gloom. They will hide their happiness to satisfy me. Still, I slice away piece by piece their beautiful belief that life is good, amusing, and yes sometimes you do need to sing.

I wonder if my practice of gratification procrastination started with Sunday school. The teaching of the afterlife, of heaven, mixed in with orange Kool-Aid and leading us to believe that there is something better. That church and life need to be serious and suffered through. Jesus died for us the least we can do is not be happy. We will be happy later. Maybe.

I am the master of all procrastination, not just good things. I struggle with the present moment. It should be a safe place, but my depression has always been a nag. She doesn't like the now. She wants me to relive every little mistake I've ever made. That pink leopard print sweatshirt in 7th grade; the fact that it took me almost twenty years to get a degree; that day I bought all the lingerie. My brain, filled to the top with the past, leaves little room for other things like thankfulness, contentment, and joy.

Sometimes my depression takes a vacation and lets hypomania stay in her room. She thinks she is the fun one. We wake up early and go to sleep late. We throw all that procrastination shit out the window and bury it in the yard. We

can do, be, buy, and conquer anything. That feeling makes me want to eat up every bit of happy as quickly as possible. The problem is, like any binge, eventually it makes me sick, and the things I thought made me happy were artificial. The truth always returns home with extra suitcases.

If I can't trust my mind to tell me the truth, then how can I be present? Who the hell knows. The only answer I have found is to look towards my children and use lots of medication. A therapist doesn't hurt either. My kids show me exactly who I am and the example I've been setting. I've been trying to teach them and myself how to deal with the bad. And we forget about the good, but they are teaching me to refuse the lesser, to savor better today instead of waiting for tomorrow.

I started reading *The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up* by Marie Kondo and threw it away before learning how to correctly fold a bra. Folding doesn't bring me joy. I bought those wrinkled bras and underwear during one of my up episodes. I had to have them, needed all of them. I want to trust that version of me who believed I deserved to have them. I don't have to always wait. So I sing a little as I put on the blue-lace, balconette, boost bra then slip on the matching high-leg panties. Once on, no balloons drop, no trumpets sound, and no perfection is achieved, but that's okay. I am okay, and my butt is better than okay.

HOME EXECUTIVE

Cassia Herron

Daddy was a Navy man. He left Kentucky for California when we were toddlers. He was always away from home. As a young girl, I dreamed of what it would be like to have my father around—to live with Daddy. I believed one day I would.

I finally got the chance. I was 37 with a family.

My partner Gerome and I had been living in our home for ten years—since we had our daughter, Bella. He spent the first year in the house, alone, while I completed graduate school in Ann Arbor. Our son, Michael, came a couple years later.

“You talk to your daddy today?” my sister Keturah asked. She had come over to visit one Sunday evening.

“Nope. You?” I replied.

“Yeah. He’s in Nebraska.”

“For what?”

“He said he’s on his way home. You didn’t know?” she asked.

“Nawwwww.”

“Well, he’s in a U-Haul and on his way to your house.” Sure enough, Monday afternoon Daddy arrived at the back of my house with his U-Haul.

When asked, Gerome let me know that he and Daddy had been in regular—not frequent— communication about his

move back home. It wasn't a new conversation. It was new, however, to learn the two of them had been planning.

Daddy had been mesmerized by Gerome's charm and his ability to sell a dream—mine actually. He was hustling my dream... to my father. My dream of owning a bed and breakfast. He said we needed Daddy to network the building. The plan was for him to stay with us until he found a place, and together we'd run a successful business. Daddy told me that he wanted to move home to be with his family. His family was my sister and me, first, right? So, why did he make plans with Gerome?

This was reminiscent of my trip to South Africa.

Several years prior, I'd arranged to visit Cape Town with the bishop of my church. Gerome was pissed, partly because I'd be staying with a man. As a preacher himself, I guess he had ideas. He didn't want me to go. How could I fathom such a crazy idea. He'd asked, *Are you out of your mind?*

Indeed, Gerome had forbidden me to do other things. I lost out on a front-row seat to see Jay-Z because he was uncomfortable that my friend had invited her teenage male cousin. New York, London, and many trips to Chicago with my girls because I knew he'd pitch a fit. He caused me to miss countless community and board meetings because he wasn't *babysitting* while I *went to work for the white man for free*. During my thirties, I missed much in efforts to please him.

But South Africa, *the Motherland?* Really? The two men closest to me attempted to defer my dream. The day before

my appointment Daddy backed out of paying for my shots. The next morning I received my tax refund—*cha-ching!*

At some point while he was staying with us, I let Daddy know how bad an idea it was for him to show up the way he did, *This arriving at my house with all your shit—all your shit in a U-Haul without even a 24-hour notice? Feels a lot like “Gerome doesn’t want you to leave your family, so I can’t pay for your shots” bullshit. That bullshit!*

Daddy eventually left Louisville the same way he came. It was abrupt. Keturah informed me.

“Daddy wants to come by and see the kids. He’s going back to California tomorrow.”

The next year, a week after I turned 40, I left Gerome. I had a retreat to attend and I imagined his reaction. *I’m sick of these meetings, Cassia! He would say. How you getting there? You not driving my truck. Whatcha gon’ do with the kids?* I called after work and told him I had a meeting over the weekend and when I returned, I wasn’t coming home. I’d been renting a house for six months, and I was finally going to stay there.

The year I visited South Africa, it was not a vacation. I was on assignment. My work was helping church members heal relationships with their pastors and each other. It was hard, emotional work. Despite those challenges, for twelve days I participated in reverent-filled worship services and revelled in the commonalities of Black culture there and at home—big booties, hair weave, and the love for cell phones!

There were differences, too, like the composition of their households and how they were run. When I described my part-time consulting/mother/organizer life to the women I met, they would respond, “Oh, you’re a home executive. Who’s your help?” I’d then explain—and after the third time embarrassingly so—that I didn’t have the in-home help they did. My mother lived 100 miles away and was still working, and though I sent the kids to childcare and we occasionally hired sitters and cleaning help, we’d never considered asking a family member to live with us.

Gerome and my father solidified for me that I’d never have the intergenerational, interconnected family structures like those in the Cape—at least not with them. I acknowledge that my children will likely have a different kind of fucked-up relationship with their father as I have with mine. Therapy is giving me clarity and I’m giving myself grace.

I’ve stopped talking to my father, and both his and Gerome’s texts go directly to my spam box. I’m learning to have fun, soaking up lots of new music and concerts and keeping busy with community work. I find myself creating a new normal, where I give myself permission to do whatever I want to do. I plan to travel internationally with the kids next year. I want to go back to South Africa.

