

# RIPPLES

SARABANDE WRITING LABS, VOL. 17

# 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](http://www.sarabandebooks.org/swl)

## **ABOUT THIS VOLUME:**

The essays collected in this volume were written during a six-week workshop series for woman-identifying and nonbinary writers held at Louisville South Central Regional Library and taught by writer and columnist Minda Honey.

## **SPECIAL THANKS TO:**

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# CONTENTS

|                                   |                                |           |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>INTRODUCTION</b>               | <i>Minda Honey</i>             | <b>5</b>  |
| <b>SPROUT</b>                     | <i>Apryll Clark</i>            | <b>7</b>  |
| <b>TERMS &amp; CONDITIONS</b>     | <i>Katrina Ice</i>             | <b>10</b> |
| <b>MEMORY OF A FATHER</b>         | <i>Heather Gotlib</i>          | <b>14</b> |
| <b>BEETS</b>                      | <i>Annetta Dillon</i>          | <b>17</b> |
| <b>YOU LOOK GREAT</b>             | <i>Lindsay Sainlar Strobel</i> | <b>20</b> |
| <b>THE LUXURY OF A SINGLE MOM</b> | <i>Megan A. Gregory</i>        | <b>23</b> |



# 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



# SPROUT

Apryll Clark

Two months, two pounds, too early. Choosing to be a Scorpio instead of a Capricorn meant there was a slight miscommunication between legs, spine, and brain; an injury or brief moment without oxygen—it doesn't really matter. What matters is that it left my parents with questions I can only begin to understand as an adult: Will she walk? Drive? Go to school? My grandmother even tells me I was born with no ears, until one day my Daddy exclaims, "What!?! Do you think they grew outside?" He laughs.

Turns out the coolest part isn't even true.

I come home from the hospital as a Christmas gift. Thirty-one years later, a-hundred-plus pounds later, a license, a degree, and a working set of ears—to them I'm a "miracle baby."

I'm a miracle but I can't even wiggle all my toes.

It's a random find, the most recent in a list of things I slowly find I can't do. My normal is normal until I realize it isn't, long after everyone else, decades after everyone else. My limitations aren't limitations until the quotation marks fall off, until I can't keep up with my friends, until I'm off balance, until invitations neglect to tell me the stairs have no rails, until turning thirty really doesn't feel like twenty, until inspiration is just frustration, until I'm not normal, not to me.

I read an article about older people's biggest regrets; among them, lack of exercise. I'm almost thirty. Maybe I can be normal. I go to the gym. I go from walking no miles to walking six miles every week until I (predictably) get shin splints. I go to the doctor, who suggests physical therapy to maintain strength. They stretch and pierce my calves with needles, and my toes loosen and wiggle, override my brain, spread out like fingers—not curled like a fist—for days at a time. It's weird, the normal. I call my Daddy, "They feel stuck that way!" I hear him laugh again, just like my ears.

Kids at physical therapy flip cartwheels while I stretch. I hate stretching and I don't much like those kids. I don't stretch at home because it reminds me of those kids and that I'm not normal, and also, mostly, because it's boring.

My toes make a fist.

My insurance determines I've had enough physical therapy in three months for a 30-year-old issue. I join another gym, a bigger one with TVs. I keep my goals modest, just to move around, a tiny middle finger to my desk job. There's a weekly "restorative" yoga class that doesn't make me bend my toes to my eyes; I drag my best friend and go.

I get used to the class, but not the "relaxation" part at the end, where I spend all five minutes laying on the floor going over in my head what I couldn't do in the class, even as what I can do expands without my noticing.

I'm still not good enough. I think about getting a cane. I wait to see the doctor. My toes clench.



Late one night, I look for people like me, thinking no one is. I find online forums, a garden of curled toes rooted in the dirt, muscles sprouting in and out of rhythm. My toes spread. Weeks later, a friend comes into town. He prods me gently about how I see my myself, how others will see me with a cane. My toes curl. He nods at the right times, then, "I don't know how you see it, but I'd think, 'Cool! Now I get a weapon!'"

I laugh so hard the conversation stops. Something inside me moves, stops, then dissolves, uncurls.

I go back to physical therapy, a different one this time, one with TVs and modest goals and stepping blocks and progress reports and someone who listens. I see small miracles in muscle compensations, in altered gaits, in "mechanical differences," in looser hips, in spread toes.

I get the cane as a gift from my mother; it shows up earlier than I expected. I stand, weaponized. My toes curl, root me to the floor. I sprout and walk away from normal.

# TERMS & CONDITIONS

Katrina Ice

Dear Jessie,

First off, happy tenth anniversary. Apparently, this one is commemorated by tin and aluminum. I think it fits—we have absolutely proven durability and flexibility. It amazes me that an entire decade has passed and there are still things to say and do and so many new ways to annoy you. Much has transpired over that time. A lot of happiness, and some other stuff. Also, every season of *Intervention*, *Forensic Files*, *The First 48*, *Unsolved Mysteries*, and whatever misery television that falls into your whim. Why are you so fascinated by so many mysteriously disappeared spouses?

I am sorry that twelve hours after the celebration of this milestone, I managed to completely upend everything. Now in less than a month, I will be exactly halfway around the world for precisely half a year undertaking an adventure in intentional displacement. Your support was conferred unconditionally even though it provokes profound anxiety. I wonder who I am outside of my immediate context. Ten years ago, I never had to contend with this thought. Who I will be in a Japanese context? I wonder who you will be in my absence. I am grateful that you will take complete stewardship of our home. You asked for a household accounting.

This one-hundred-year-old house commands constant maintenance. The porch and the garage and the sidewalks have formed cracks in the shape of dollar signs. (By the way, property taxes are due on the first of December to get the two-percent discount). I sincerely believe we live perfectly in this imperfect structure, which provides both shelter and comfort. (Seal any emerging cracks and gaps in windows or doors with caulk.)

I wonder if you think about how much family hallow these eight-hundred-square-feet? I do. (Remove the leaves from the gutters in the fall.) Pieces of our parents and our sisters and our friends reside here. (Drain the hot water heater before winter.) Our dogs are buried in the backyard. (The lawn needs to be cut every ten days). I appreciate that you will take great care of its furry inhabitants. (Know that Fat Tony does like you, but he is a cat, so his ways and biting behavior are inherently mysterious. Well, maybe. Either way, I worry about his advancing age and the stress this situation will cause him. Also, he and the dog are exceptionally hairy, so the air filters need to be replaced bimonthly.)

Reminders of cousins and uncles and aunts are everywhere—in the drywall of the home office and the ceiling of the back bedroom, in the patching of the concrete stairwells and basement shelves. The dining room chandelier that you hate—very 1970s and from Sears—belonged to my mother's mother who died in 1982. (This needs to be dusted once a month-ish.) The vintage cornflower casserole dishes

belonged to Aunt Betty. (She would be horrified about the tofu bakes, but these are preferable to the dinner cereal to which you gravitate when left on your own.) On my birthday, Aunt Brenda would renew my *National Geographic* subscription. My great aunt Gladys bestowed me decades of past issues. These were the gifts that gave me ideas and schemes and helped me to cultivate knowledge and curiosity of the world. (Please do not consign these to the recycling bin even though I know you hate paper “clutter.” I’m coming back. Renewed plotting shall unfold.)

My other grandmother gifted the quilts that you insist on using to cover the couch from fur and paws. When I drink and read and get slightly maudlin while wrapped up in said gift, I think that we have assembled our life like a great quilt, threading together disparate scraps of our separate histories into a larger fabric of a tandem devising. We are the artful design of patient, resourceful women who constantly revise and edit, patching where the material has worn through. (Could you maybe please refrain from using Margaret’s quilts, though? They are starting to show a bit too much wear. Also, they smell a bit like wet dog and bourbon. I will take care of them when I return.)

I keep coming back to the question, “What does home require of us?” Because I have to tell you, it is a peculiar thing to want always to go and also to always stay. To want to be known yet to want to be alone. But what I really think

it requires of us, is to honor the terms and conditions of the home that we have made and the home that we carry within us. And I know that by the time you have read this, I will have left our home in good hands.

Love,  
Katrina

# MEMORY OF A FATHER

Heather Gotlib

It happens on Watterson Trail between my two grandmothers' houses, right after my eighth birthday, which my father is pretending he hasn't forgotten. Something bad is in the air. I know because I see the empty Budweiser bottles, looking naked with their caps removed, all tucked back into their cardboard container. It's the only careful thing I have ever seen him do.

As the car screeches and flies into the air and the smell of burnt rubber and blood break the honeysuckle peace of a late July night, I have my head out the window, singing a song from *Dumbo* into the wind. It is the one where the elephants are all drunk, and it's kind of silly but also a nightmare.

One afternoon that fall, my mother sits across from me on a bench at Skyview Softball Park, where I don't play because I am chubby and don't like other kids. I like sitting with my mother instead, talking. She names my father's problems, things I've only ever heard about in fantastical worlds, dramatic novels I am too young to read but do anyway, role playing in D.A.R.E. class. The next year, she will speak the truth about Santa Claus just as frankly, like I already know.

I am in my first fiction class, eighteen years old and sure I will never need a father again. I know I am not grown up yet.

I wonder if I am going to grow up to be like my father.

I don't have a short story in me, I think, so I write about the night that the car crashed on Watterson Trail instead. I write the perspective of the father. I named the father Walt because I don't know anyone with that name in real life. I imagine that Walt finds his daughter alien, a burden, looks with discomfort, disgust at the princess underwear spilling out from her little backpack on the kitchen table. As I write, I wonder how much I'm imagining.

Unrealistic, my professor, a passionate bearded man fresh out of the Peace Corps writes in my margins. What kind of father would feel this way? What kind of father would do this to a child, his own child?

The second car accident happens the day after the Kentucky Derby. I am in graduate school running errands to get away from research. The sun is shining in a way that promises a relentless new summer, but it is quiet.

The smell of rubber, the crunch of metal, the way time slows down almost to a stop feel familiar, almost comforting. They feel like the memory of a father. I haven't seen mine in five years. We are forever trapped at a kitchen table, eyes flitting between a child's open backpack and a six-pack of empty beer bottles. The last time I saw him I was twenty-three. It was the year before I got engaged to a man the opposite of him. He and I were headed to New York, where my father had never been. We sat at that same kitchen table

while my father smoked cigarettes and we tried, stilted, to make conversation.

Afterward, I walked out the door and never came back. I changed my phone number. I used the same language to talk about him that people use to talk about their dead fathers. I didn't know it was the last time I would see him.

The man behind the wheel has eyes that are dark forest green like mine, like my father's. Or at least they are red-rimmed and stiff like my father's.

I am angry. I am never angry, but today I am. The friction burns on my wrists bubble up as I walk to the driver's seat of the purple Camry, see a sad drunk face, look into his eyes.

I don't know, he says.

He and I never exchange another word, either.

In a few minutes witnesses will run out of their own Buick to comfort me, and my mother will rush from church to hold me, twenty-seven years old, in her arms for a moment. In a few days I will have a new car. In a few months I will be able to drive past this spot again without my foot edging toward the brake.

For now, I walk away, focus instead on the honeysuckle bush blowing in the wind from the cars that are still moving like nothing happened. And this is how I wait, alone.



# BEETS

Annetta Dillon

He ate beets all the time with everything. *What they taste like?* I wonder. They look nasty. Always beets. He lives two houses down. Well, there's a big space and then one house and then his house. He's got the best house on the block, I think.

I always go to the side door. He hear me knocking. I hear him fumbling with the locks on the door. He open the door. How does he know it's me? He let me in. It's dark in there, kind of. Don't remember any other part of the house but the kitchen. That's where we always go to the kitchen. He walk as if he can see. His arms are stretch out. Yet he move through the kitchen as if he can see.

I wonder what he's gonna cook today. One day he cooked a rabbit. Never ate a rabbit before. I always sit in the same chair at the kitchen table. I watch him. He pour me something to drink. I'm waiting to see if he spills it. But he never does. He puts a finger in the glass and somehow he knows to stop pouring. I watch to see if he's gonna burn himself while he's cooking that rabbit. But he don't. How he do dat? He talks as he move around the kitchen. But I don't know or don't remember what he's saying cause I'm too busy watching him and I'm so hungry. It smells good. His food always smells good.

I know he's got a wife but I never see her. I think she goes to work and I'm not suppose to come til she go to work. But she's never there. I don't even know what she look like. He's talking, I don't know what he's saying cause I'm eating everything and watching, seeing him move around. How he do dat? He say he can't see and he wear those black glasses. But I think he can see. I mean he must be able to see cause he never ran into anything, never fall, never burn himself when cooking, and how do he knows when it's even done? How? He's gotta see something. But he suppose to be blind. I don't know. But he cooks real good. The food is always good.

He takes my hand and we go out the back door. Every-time after I eat we go outside in the backyard. But I like the backyard. It has grapes all the way around the yard and I get to eat as many as I want. Then he call me to him. I go to him. He reach out for me and he sit me on his lap or sometimes in between his legs. Always, he like feeling my body, especially down there. He does that all the time. While I eat my grapes. I don't know why he does dat. I don't like it. But he does it all the time. When I finish eating I never tell anybody cause maybe I won't get nothing to eat.

I never remember when I leave. Don't remember how long I'm there. Anyway, he smoke that nasty pipe. How he do them things? I stare away and eat my grapes while his hands is down there. Sometimes I stare at him when I think he's not looking. To see if he could see me or anything else.

But how do he know when he's got some of those beets?

And why do he like them so much? I don't think I really like him. But he always fed me and I can eat as much grapes as I want. Don't know how old I am or even how long I go down there. I think maybe when we moved, I remember one time he sent money and stuff in a cab to my mom for us. Us being Lissie and me. I wonder if he fed her too. Don't remember. Maybe I'm five or six maybe. I don't like him but I eat real good. But I tell you one thing. I won't eat no beets. Nope. I Won't do it. Nasty beets.

# YOU LOOK GREAT

Lindsay Sainlar Strobel

“How much have I gained?” I asked.

“A little more than 20 pounds,” the nurse said. “You look great.”

Sitting there in Women’s First was the first time I didn’t come back with a flippant remark to dismiss the compliment. I was 34 weeks pregnant. My son’s heartbeat and mine were beating as they should. Our bodies growing together as they should. And my body looked as it should — round and firm and whole.

“You look great” was a comment I heard frequently throughout my pregnancy. Strangers in the supermarket who felt entitled to comment on my weight. Friends at the pool. Family members at dinner who offered me their leftovers, told me to eat more, to feed the baby.

For most of my life, instead of “You look great” there were looks that said, “Are you sure you want to eat that?” as I pinched and pulled and pushed at excess skin, imagining what I would look like if I could just lose weight, tighten up, quit eating.

Years prior—somewhere between no longer needing to see an eating disorder specialist and falling in love with the man I would eventually have a baby with—I answered a phone

call from a good friend living in Baltimore who was high on heroin.

She had been my sidekick around the time I was battling bulimia for the third time. We were living at the beach, and we would spend hours staring at the ocean, drinking sweet tea vodka and talking about my addiction. The draws, the drawbacks, what was happening inside my head, the urges, the purges, and what I was told could happen if I didn't stop. She was the kind of friend who let me wriggle with the ugliness without looking over my shoulder. And, eventually, long after I left the beach and moved up North, I gained a sense of control and we lost touch.

When she called me that day, I was afraid she was going to ask for money, but she only wanted to know if I was still making myself throw up. I told her I wasn't, and she wanted to know how I had learned to say no.

A few months later, she was sending letters from her addiction treatment facility about her battle to get and stay clean. About her fight to ignore her urges. The nights she dreamed of relapse. How she'd wake panicked, sweaty, not being able to quite shake the feeling. How that feeling had her on edge.

I wrote back that I had those same nightmares—I would eat a meal I had every intention to purge but could never find a bathroom. I wrote that those dreams haunted my days. But I never sent her those letters.

When my son was born, my body continued to be his. He needed the drum of my heartbeat to sleep. The nutrients from my diet and breast milk to grow. The touch of my hands to be soothed. My body became something different altogether. It was no longer a body that needed to look thin.

My body got soft and even softer as I lay on the couch, letting my baby grow strong. I knew that my body was supposed to look this way. But, stepping out of the bathroom and listening to what the mirror had to say, returning to the couch, my baby asleep, my husband would reach for me. And I would recoil at his touch. I would tell him that I was ashamed. That I hated my body. That I knew he would one day find me disgusting.

Each time I recoil, he finds a way to lie next to me and the baby we created. He never says anything, it's his heart beat that repeats over and over, "You look great," while he waits for me to believe it.

# THE LUXURY OF A SINGLE MOM

Megan A. Gregory

As a child, I feared my mother dying. I always assumed it would be murder. Something gruesome and dramatic. Maybe it was watching *Twin Peaks* when I was eight. It was her favorite show, so clearly it was mine, too. That's how our team would split, a monster would take her from me, some Bob would take my Laura Palmer. If my mom left me alone for longer than forty-five minutes, I'd rehearse having a conversation with the 911 dispatch. Instead of calling 911, I'd call my dad, an unlikely hero. He would be pleased to receive the call because for once he wasn't the bad parent.

Eventually, our backdoor would open. We lived on the second floor of a four-plex in Lexington, tucked away in the suburbs. It was painted a chipped peach and had a sprawling evergreen in the front yard. The spot where we took our milestone pictures. My mother would walk in, me imagining her barely escaping death at the grip of a madman. My dad would call my mom irresponsible for leaving me alone, conveniently ignoring our drunken adventures, Jim Beam or Sterling Silver snuggled between his thick thighs in the car, listening to NWA or Bonnie Raitt, scalping tickets and selling bootleg t-shirts. She would be sweating, purple headband

hugging her freckled head, her face purple-red and pretty. She would be wearing a purple shirt, a lighter shade than her face, with the Cheers logo she had bought on a trip with my grandparents and aunt to the NBC studios in New York City. She had to leave me behind with my father; I had the chickenpox. I had been scared she was going to die on the flight over or be murdered by a mugger in Times Square. But she would make it home from her one trip to NYC, her grocery store trips, and even her jogs.

It was natural for my mom to go to Disney with my family. I have three kids and a husband, and we needed an even count. Of course, she'd go. I'm an only child, and I'd need her. She lived to help me, love me. And it'd be fun, right? It's what happy families do.

It was more hard labor than pure familial enjoyment. At one point she was so miserable she sat in a crowd of people she didn't know but hated anyways and wept because it was too much and she thought we'd lost her. She was spinning in Futureland, Alice in a teacup-panicked meltdown, made worse by the mocking of the Mad Hatter, probably played by me. I was more consumed with greed, finding each landmark like Captain Hook searching for Peter Pan.

I found her, defeated and hopeless, by a Lilo & Stitch pop photog session. I tried to comfort her physically by buying her a thirty-dollar spray bottle/fan contraption. I filled her water bottle with lukewarm water from the fountain and sat



with her because I was hating it too. I was stressed because we were wasting time. We should have been melting down while waiting in line for Splash Mountain; the line was registering at over three hours on my DisneyGo app.

I provide pets, food, comfort, shelter, laughter, and discipline for my girls. We still have storytime, reciting our favorite books from memory, "Big C, little c, what begins with C, camel on the ceiling, C C C C." We are all best friends, my mother included. I've proclaimed on many Mother's Day Facebook posts that my mother and I are a team. Sharing a picture from 1987, her smiling a crooked smile with bright, gray eyes, freckles on smooth skin, a birthmark an inch in diameter placed perfectly in the center of her throat. I was freckled as well, with auburn hair kept short because my mom had no idea how to brush such thick, coarse hair.

I often wonder why my daughters never feel such piqued anguish when I leave. They have cellphones and a landline to reach me, but they've never tried. They will never experience the absolute fear of losing the only thing they have, because they have many. They'd make it without me, they'd have their Nana and occasional wistful thoughts that I'd be looking over their shoulder from some heavenly mountain. They don't have the luxury of a single mother. A mother that is meant only for them, no other love to give anyone else.

Four hours later on Splash Mountain, in the souvenir photo amusement parks take while you're mid-ride, faces

eschewed in pure horror as your body thinks you are being thrown to your death, my oldest and middle are sitting in delighted horror in the front row, my husband is with my youngest looking deft and unbothered, and I'm clutching my mother for dear life, while she laughs.







