

**THE ALMOST MOTHERS OF THE  
GREATER LOUISVILLE METRO AREA**

**SARABANDE WRITING LABS, VOL. 10  
VOICES OF CHANGE SPECIAL EDITION**

# 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 and literary events.

Visit our website for photos, updates, and upcoming events:  
[www.sarabandebooks.org/swl](http://www.sarabandebooks.org/swl)

## ABOUT THIS VOLUME:

The poems collected in *The Almost Mothers of the Greater Louisville Metropolitan Area* were submitted to the “Voices of Change” poetry contest held by Sarabande Writing Labs in partnership with the University of Louisville’s Youth Violence Prevention Research Center.

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# INTRODUCTION

by Kristen Miller, Director of Sarabande Writing Labs

Until recently, in the aftermath of any community violence involving youth, public discourse has been driven by adult “experts”: politicians, pundits, journalists, researchers. Only since the school shooting in Parkland, Florida, seemingly, have young people been invited to speak publicly about the violence that touches their lives. It should surprise no one that, when handed the microphone, they address the roots and ramifications of violence in their communities with great thoughtfulness, nuance, and complexity. It’s clear that not only are young people eager to participate in this dialogue, they are vital to it. The poems collected in this volume, written by poets as young as eleven years of age, reflect this reality.

The “Voices of Change” contest, held by Sarabande Writing Labs in partnership with the University of Louisville’s Youth Violence Prevention Research Center, invited Louisville-based,

woman-identifying writers, ages 11-21, to submit writing about their experiences with conflict and violence as well as with peace and healing. *The Almost Mothers of the Greater Louisville Metropolitan Area* comprises just sixteen of the nearly 200 poems submitted to the contest, powerful works representing a vast range of experience: from domestic violence and gun violence to the violence of street harassment to the intimate violence of our cultural indifference toward female reproductive health.

During the creation of this anthology, one thing became clear: the violence experienced by young women in our community is far more pervasive than many of us know. It's vitally important that young women be invited to the public dialogue about their own experiences. By the hundreds, they are ready to tell their stories. To them I say, keep telling us. Your voices are so valuable. In the words of Kylie Z., age 12, "You need to get up, get up! . . . Tell your neighbor, tell the internet! Make it big! Let the world know."

# THE ALMOST MOTHERS OF THE GREATER LOUISVILLE METROPOLITAN AREA

Eli P., 17

But here's the thing—  
I already know that I'm gonna lose this baby.  
Even though I'm seventeen and  
I've never seen a penis before and  
I'm not pregnant,  
I have never been pregnant,  
I know that I will lose my baby in  
The same way my mother lost her other four:  
Pouring out of me before the first ultrasound, just like  
Her mother and her mother and her mother before her,  
lost in the

TrAnslation

Between womb and  
Nightmare and  
Daydream because  
That's just how it is on this bitch of an earth.

We lose our babies between Rubbertown and Middletown  
with our  
Panties pulled tight between our ankles and  
Our knees pushed together, shaking, while our

Fingers come away bloody and our sisters  
Keep knocking on the bathroom door, loudly, because  
It's Christmas and she has to pee and the toddlers have made  
    a mess of  
The one downstairs so  
Could we please let her in, she really has to go, it's an  
    emergency,  
And miscarriages aren't an emergency because  
We don't talk about them so how could we label them as such?  
So we, so we, so we—

I don't know.

I don't know what happens next because this is where the  
Story always ~~cuts off~~,  
Like a disc skipping to the end of the song, there's a piece  
    missing between  
Points A and B that  
I guess I'll find when I'm bleeding out alone on a toilet in  
    Old Louisville,  
Losing a baby without a name.



# MOTHER

Vanessa F., 20

On off days and on lone days  
I am feeling so much younger; bare.  
So I finally mourn her.  
I keep her fragments, like a humid memory.  
Blonde hair, biscuit dough, honeysuckle.

Sometimes I remember her in future tense.  
I see her empty seat at my wedding, and  
her shadow loving my children.  
I have my mother's flighty ways, I know  
She left before I could learn her face.

I am missing love.  
But, often, my stepmother would love me until my skin  
turned purple  
and my arms welted, and my lips bled, so I wonder  
who I'll grow into.

I watch myself mold my body—a scarred temple.  
Now I have three Mothers.  
Mother who birthed me, Mother who raised me  
and Mother I am sculpting from the seafoam  
and my own spilt blood.

# I AM PAINTING THE WORLD WITH PEACE

Believe C., 13

I wish I could say I've never experienced violence  
But I've seen my motherland refuse to give birth to fruit  
Because too much innocent blood has poured into her roots  
We have learned to make beauty out of blood  
Red and burgundy are the only colors we see  
No more blue or yellow or green  
Everything bleeds these days  
I've stopped identifying whose dead body is laying  
    on the earth  
And what kind of death they suffered through  
Instead I make murals out of their blood  
It's my way of honoring the dead  
Remembering the heroes who never got a memorial  
But I am tired of burying dead bodies  
there is no more room in those cemeteries  
I need to breathe  
I want to say I've never experienced violence  
But red and burgundy are the only colors this world bleeds  
And I refuse to let it be  
I am painting the sky with blue  
Decorating it with stars of kindness  
Embracing diversity and madness  
I am planting seeds of love so the flowers of beauty can  
    grow again

I am rinsing oppression out of the earth, baptising her in fire  
and water

I am gathering her children in my arms

Teaching them the song of freedom

Reminding them that it is their battlecry

And they were born with it so as long as they scream it

Nobody can take it away from them

# NEW DAWN

Shelby S., 17

I will be the flashing light  
You see at night and  
The flashing light you see  
During the day  
I will not go away.

I will become enormous and glow  
And everyone will  
Know what a  
Resurrected woman looks like.

Live in awe  
And in fear of me  
Because you will  
See how  
I rise like dust  
Like Maya  
And out of the ash  
Like Sylvia.

A new dawn is  
On the horizon.  
The one I've been  
Up all night for,

Dawn is coming  
And I will be one of  
The first to see it.

I will push past  
Those of you who oppose me  
And rather me be small  
Than anything close to tall.

I know my role has always  
Been the supporting role,  
But the script has been ripped open  
And the dialogue is scattered to the wind.

This time,  
I'm the protagonist,  
Lead,  
Sun,  
New Dawn  
Is all of me or a part.

And all of you  
Who doubt this to be  
True  
Will be blinded in this new sun's gaze.

I have a fire in me  
That burns so heavily

It tells me that the dawn is near  
And I believe it more than  
My own fears.

The new dawn will have me running,  
Leaving a trail of  
Ash and dust behind me  
I will chase this new dawn and  
Keep it as long as I can.

# TO THE TREES WHO SACRIFICED THEMSELVES FOR THE WALKOUT

Dorothy A., 15

I think a lot about the boy who killed himself the day  
Trump was elected president,  
and I think that when he died he took God with him.  
Because at my school, interior design never means learning  
how to barricade a door in less than  
43.4 seconds. So, I'm sorry, but I can't believe in God.  
Not when I participate in a school walkout and my poster  
saying "We Stand with Parkland" rips  
and I feel every fiber of hope falling out of my heart and I walk  
back into school holding my best  
friend like tomorrow is the day that we are going to die.  
And all I say is "I love you."  
All I can tell them is how beautiful I think they are.  
When every day when I wake up knowing that there are more  
people who won't.  
Because that could've been us.  
When I know no one will care until it happens to them.  
When my own dad tells me he doesn't know how big of a deal  
gun violence is.  
Dad,  
This. This is how big of a deal gun violence is.

It doesn't matter if it isn't your senator, find a zip code  
and write them.

Pick up your pen and write like your best friend is going  
to die tomorrow.

And tell them how beautiful they are.



# ASK LIKE A WASP

*after Danez Smith*

Aya A., 11

Ask if safety is near.

As if violence is off limits.

Ask if violence is the answer.

As if someone who didn't do anything wrong can be hurt.

Ask if promoting respect is wrong.

Ask these questions and think.

Ask not like a bee who stings and dies,  
but like a wasp who stings and stays alive.

I don't want violence anymore.

I want a good president.

I want good laws and actions.

I want a sprinkle of gold  
on a butterfly's wing,  
stating all violence is gone.

I want safety for all people like a cool wind.

We will feel like a bird that flies in the air swiftly.

Safety and violence are different, but we need safety.

I look in eyes and see terror.

I imagine the fear is gone and the morning light is left.

Let's not sit and stare at violence like it's a balloon being  
blown forever.

Let us not make ourselves fail because of violence.

Let us fight for safety, fight against violence.

Let us fight for differences.

Let us fight with differences.

# POST-CHASE

Mayukha B., 15

a mighty wallop of noise envelops reality  
speaking the words of confidence and advocacy  
to those who listen to the loudest and demean the young  
until the next catastrophic failure of humanity arrives

haggard gestures make no difference i assure you  
a pity it is that that which needs amendments  
dictates the vain of which 17 children died in.  
they shall not die in vain and i shall not plead.

i did not grow up with gunshots at midnight  
but well aware i was made and possibly  
that exactly is why i am cynical in the face of idealism.  
i am a jaded mess of a disappointed idealist

we all stand a bit jaded don't we?

oh no, i don't speak for you. i speak for  
the future victims of your half-baked mentality.  
after all, you are nothing beyond  
regret tied with lace, indifference post-chase

# THE MORNING AFTER (OR 12:17PM)

Anna R., 18

How do you love someone when his fingertips are tattooed  
on your skin?

When there are bruises where no one can see them  
except the nurse with the cold hands saying "I know  
this hurts but I need you to stay still"

Stay Still

What would've happened if you'd stayed still?  
Shut down and let your mind roam while his hands roam  
and close your eyes  
"It'll be over soon"  
Was his black eye worth tattoos and bruises and lack of sleep  
and PLEASE DON'T  
TOUCH ME

How are you supposed to explain to a person who is nice  
and interesting and has kept a  
respectful distance why you do want to go back to their place,  
but you don't want to cry in their bed tonight  
and that No I'm not a prude, I've just learned to be more  
careful and to

"Stay Still"  
"It'll be over soon"

How did you face him?

How did you sit through a dinner right next to him and not  
say a thing?

When his hands roamed through the air to hug you how did  
you manage to

“Stay Still”

“All Done”

“Now I have some questions that may be difficult to answer”

# BOTANY

Elena N., 17

Transformation is critical because  
it can take form in many things,  
And can formulate within  
The deepest of soils.

Transformation is my confusion  
When a legal system  
Ripped me away from my father and  
Disguised itself as a divorce agreement

Transformation is my fear  
When The Fifth Fiancee handles my  
Mother without care;  
I am planted.

Transformation is my age,  
Because at twelve I had to be  
Fifteen, and at seventeen  
I have to be twenty.

Transformation is my soul  
Listening to my grandmother softly tell  
Stories from when I can't remember.  
I am germinating.

•

Transformation is my tongue  
In my mouth, because it is sharp, but  
Withheld when I stare at my mother as  
She undermines me indefinitely

Transformation is my cerebracy  
Thumbing through every possible  
Option, but she is stunting my potential.  
I am sprouting.

Transformation is my sweat  
After packing what I could into  
My purple suitcase, searching  
For solace somewhere solemn

Transformation is my perspective  
When my aunt opens her arms to  
Me; she is the sepals I have lacked.  
I am close to full bloom.

Transformation is my eyes  
Blinking through thick surprise,  
In attempt to see a foreign  
Woman-shaped reflection

Transformation is I  
When given space; where only  
Clarity and sunlight reign.  
I am liberated.

# BRUISES

London C., 15

She was a canvas.

A canvas of purple and brown and black,  
smothered with messy stains of bruises,  
large and small watercolors of tears and pain,  
from the heartbreak and anger and distress.

Outlining this fragile, light, shell of a body.  
a delicate boundary that could be erased at any time,  
a boundary that can be invaded or destroyed,  
covered by those watercolors of pain,  
smothered by those stains of bruises.

From a far, it's abstract, beautiful, a piece of art.  
something you wouldn't touch,  
but still feel the temptation to,  
and that temptation would drive you forward.

Up close, you see the mess.  
you see the struggle and pain and hurt,  
you see the weakness and vulnerability,  
the ease of smearing the boundaries away,  
the effortless task of adding more paint and watercolor,  
more pain and tears and heartbreak,  
all because it was easy and effortless,  
and you had nothing but the temptation to touch it.

# MEMORIES

Aamy V., 15

i don't remember it.  
not like i don't want to  
or i just can't put my finger on it  
but like i have no memory of it  
wiped from my brain  
as if it wasn't even mine in the first place  
and i guess it wasn't  
in that moment  
I wasn't mine  
i belonged to someone else  
nothing that happened was under my control  
before and after i was left to deal with it myself  
but during i was lost  
i was floating almost at land  
but never quite reaching  
i can't remember it  
i know something bad happened  
i can feel the awfulness of it  
but i don't remember it  
because it's not my memory  
because i lost my control  
it was ripped out of me  
I was raped.



# AFRICAN QUEEN

Doneah M., 18

Oh, how I love your brown skin  
Its melanin  
Nutrients  
And golden embellishments

Oh, how I love your kinks, coils, and curls  
With their abilities to defy gravity  
Defy the norms of beauty established by society  
Defy the realness or reality

Oh, how I love your strength  
Your resilience induces silence  
In a room full of hatred, hostility, and violence

From light skin to dark skin  
And every shade in between  
Your presence turns darkness to light  
No matter what the situation may seem or bring  
Man, O man, YOU ARE EVERYTHING

Oh, how I love you, African queen  
Your existence is proof  
No matter what life drags me through  
There will always be a way to find my purpose,  
My truth

•

A simple, yet powerful message to any person who has been subject to violence or hatred as a result of their skin color. May my words assist you in your fight against the standards of beauty. We are all African queens.

# THE LAND OF WONDER

*after Danez Smith*

Tanasia F., 11

Ask if there is a place with care.  
Ask if there is a land with creatures.  
Ask if there are more people.  
Ask if the people are nice.  
Ask if there are homes for all.  
Don't ask if the land is pretty.  
Don't ask if the people are smart.  
I don't want people crying. No more.  
I want people smiling some more.  
I want sunny days. No rainy forests.  
I want chirping birds that make you smirk.  
I want you and her together.  
I just want peace. No clowns. No guns.  
I want every adult and kid to feel safe.  
It doesn't matter what place, what street, what curve.  
Joy is hard but you can do it.  
I look at you and see nothing but success.  
I see the better in you than what you see.  
Let us not see what we have done wrong.  
Let us see what we have done right and accomplished in life.

# JUST IN A CLICK

Alanna D., 11

I see people running from gun violence, running for the hope of returning home that night. I also see happy children dancing at bonfire parties, running around the fire, roasting s'mores, laughing a small laugh with not a care in the world. I see the smiles fade as soon as the hurt, angry gunman pulls out his weapon, ready to kill. Just before, every adult at the party was dancing to the Top '90s Hits playlist. Just in a click. Anybody could lose their life at the hands of a man. I hear children's laughs as if there was no end to their amazing day. I also hear the screams of wounded victims who didn't deserve this. I hear the silences of everyone frozen in fear. I hear the thoughts of the women and children, thinking when could this violence end, nobody will do anything about it. I hear the way this could have been prevented if we only stopped gun violence.

# ANOTHER SCHOOL SHOOTING

Maggie S., 15

“another school shooting” your mom says at the dinner table  
unable to place a label on her son that reads:

“my tragedy is worth your material needs”

“I take full responsibility for violence acted upon me”

“another school shooting” the politician repeats for the 18th  
time this year

and it's only february

a tragedy we should not politicize for the sake of the families  
but how many of the families

are you ignoring

they are the ones sacrificing

while you do nothing

do you hear the pleas from the children in your own country?

do you feed off of the violence

that exists because you persist again and again

that guns are not the issue at hand

how long will you accept money from the NRA?

until everyone in the united states

is a victim of the violence that you cultivate

as leaders you have created an environment

based off your own tyrant

causing harm to citizens

not far from the

hindrance that stops the government

from protecting the hundreds of humans that rely on you for

their safety  
not just condolences

“another school shooting”  
at a south florida high school  
17 beings dead  
17 souls that inhabited bodies like yours and mine  
17 bodies that bled  
to teach americans a lesson that has already been said  
to teach families the risk of education  
to teach politicians to ignore their citizens  
to teach americans to grow accustomed to atrocities that  
    otherwise could be prevented

# IMAGINE

Kylie Z., 12

Imagine. Wait, no. Don't imagine. We don't have time for that. You need to get up, get up! You can't want something and just imagine and get it. You have to do something! And if you want a perfect world, then do something! Tell your neighbor, tell the internet! Make it big! Let the world know. You want a chance. You don't want guns. You don't want violence. You want peace. You want harmony. You don't have to love, but you don't have to hate. It's not about being correct or being the most beautiful. You want to shine as bright as the sun. No, brighter, so bright that I can't find the words. They say the earth is a sphere and that may be true, but from what I see, people seem to think the same about their attitude. When they say "you can't", what they mean is, "you can too." When the man on the corner is protesting alone, join him. Unite the light that sparks and your idea of a perfect world will become reality. People will realize that hands are for holding hands—not guns, not knives. Hate is strong, but love is stronger.

