

# THE REFRACTED SELF

SARABANDE WRITING LABS, VOL. 13

# 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.

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## **ABOUT THIS VOLUME:**

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

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# INTRODUCTION

by Minda Honey

For six weeks the eight writers in this anthology made a literary home of the South Central Regional branch of the Louisville Free Public Library. They made space for their craft around sleep schedules, career and family obligations, and the beck and call of fine summer weather. They made a bond of words and letters with each other. They encountered themselves from many different angles and perspectives in the essays we read and the essays they wrote. They pushed past what they thought was possible emotionally and on the page. These are their missives from beyond the easy place, *The Refracted Self*.

I am so proud of these writers; I feel honored to have spent the summer with them and I take special pride in introducing you to their work.

Never stop writing,  
Minda Honey



# A DELICATE KID

Rebecca Schlafer

The day my student Chase told me his step dad punched him in the gut I was hungover. It was my first year of teaching high school. I was twenty-four and teetering on the edge of alcoholism. I had no idea what I was doing or how to help the sweet kid standing in front of me.

Chase caught my eye at the start of the school year. He had feral eyes framed by blond ringlets and freckles. Stalking down the hallway in a stinking Carhartt coat, he spoke to no one. I sensed Chase and I inhabited the same state of perpetual unease. An unease I'd felt from a young age. By the time I was Chase's age, I'd learned to soften the edges of that unease with beer.

It was bad in my classroom. Students wandered around the room to pass out sunflower seeds or sit next to their friends. While I lectured on the metaphors in a Maya Angelou poem, two kids shot dice behind a propped up textbook. Chase would sit glaring in silence and watch it all pass, his jaw clenched with tension. An empty worksheet with his name on it the only evidence I had that he had been in my class. Later, I'd clean up the seed casings, broken pencils and torn worksheets. When I was growing up, the chaos in my house meant I thrived on the structure of school. Always raising my hand to give out the right answer. Pouring over a

textbook in my bedroom as my father raged and my mother soothed. Why couldn't I figure out how to give my students that same escape?

December that year, Chase started appearing in my room, early in the morning before students were allowed in the hallway, his fists balled up and mumbling about how he needed his make-up work. It was strange to see this silent, seething child at my door, but his visits continued. It got to where I could ask him a question and be met with more than a one sentence response. Giving Chase the attention he needed was a way for me to give that delicate kid in me attention. I began to bargain with myself, wondering if I could cut back on my drinking.

Chase came in my room three months later and told me about his step dad's abuse. He was sharpening my soon to be broken pencils and I was shuffling the papers I had meant to grade but had to set aside once that fourth beer hit my system. Our backs were to each other, making the hard truth easier. I remember being so touched by this brave child, so desperate to survive. I grew up in a home shrouded in shame and secrecy, and here he was telling me his secret. I told him he was very brave for sharing with me. I hurried him on to class and promised him I would take care of it. My own class streamed into my room. I had no choice but to let him go.

Later that day, I made a call to Child Protective Services. With a beige school phone cradled against my ear I retold Chase's story to a cheerful bureaucrat. That night four beers

turned to six. I never back heard from Child Protective Services. Soon Chase was gone. He quit coming to my classroom and at that time you could drop out at sixteen. I heard later from the counselor that's what he did. He evaporated, the ghost of the kid he once was.

I missed Chase creeping into my classroom in the morning. A little smile twitching at his mouth when I ushered him in with pencils to sharpen. I finished the school year and six more after that before I realized my drinking was as futile as the call I made that first year. Alcohol had unraveled my life and I wanted it back. Now, ten years sober, I marvel at Chase's belief that he was good enough to share his story. Now, I tell my story and let the secrets fall away for both of us.

# IN WHICH I DRESS MY COUSIN

Kelly K. Mimms

The mannequins in the menswear box store strike impossibly cool poses. Row after row of dress shirts and coordinating ties, sports jackets and slacks stretch before me. Billy Ocean croons Caribbean Queen through the speakers. I stand there, a lone woman out of place, the crumpled list from the funeral home sweaty in my hand. I am here to do the impossible: to pick out the clothes my cousin is to be buried in.

One week earlier I'd taken a call from said cousin as I stood in the dull fluorescence of Target, thumbing through a rack of cheap sundresses. Phone wedged between shoulder and cheek.

He hadn't wanted anything in particular, only wanted to say sorry for not calling on my birthday.

"I got you a card, though," he said. "Just waiting until I can put something in it to send it."

"You sound like shit," I said.

"Ain't nothing. Just a cold."

I don't remember every detail of our conversation. I do remember exactly how it felt: like putting down my bags at the end of a long day. Like coming home.

§

A smartly dressed salesman asks if I need assistance. I hesitate before I explain in the fewest possible words. I thrust the paper at him. He scans it and nods as if he's been in this position before. This is St. Louis North County after all. A place where too many young black men die too soon.

"Nothing too formal," I tell the salesman as we weave through the circular racks. "No suits."

In high school, my cousin refused to wear anything but designer labels, jeans with creases sharp enough to cut. When he dropped out halfway through his senior year, the designer duds were gradually replaced by a series of work uniforms: fast food, gas stations, UPS. His non-work clothes were a different kind of uniform: basketball shorts or baggy jeans, wife beaters under oversized tees, sneakers loosely laced. Benign attire that, on the black male body, is often deemed menacing. The clothing that, according to our aunt, made him look like "who they expected him to be." "They" being the police. In his thirty-three years, my cousin—my sweet, gentle, dog-loving cousin with no criminal record—had had more run-ins with the police than we could count.

The salesman pulls dress shirts from the racks. He holds each one up against his slender frame. He is built nothing like my five-foot eight cousin. I want to mention this to him, but I don't. I appreciate his effort.

## §

When my mother called to say that he was in trouble, that what we had thought was a simple summer cold had quickly turned to pneumonia—that the doctors were saying things like sepsis, and multiple organ failure—I dropped everything and hit the road. I didn't rush the four-hour drive from Louisville, but I didn't make any stops either. I listened to Adele on repeat. I braced myself.

As much as he had been the protector of the women in our family, he was always the center of our attention. A constant source of worry, a never-ending puzzle to solve. How can we get him to go back to school? To move out on his own once and for all? He's too sensitive, too sullen. He hasn't been the same since his mama passed. He was a lackluster character in his own life. To use literary terms, he lacked agency, passively flitting from one job to the next, from one relationship to another.

My cousin let go the day after I arrived at his bedside. He slipped away in the few moments it took my aunt and I to grab a cup of coffee from the lobby. The writer in me wants to find meaning here. In the final scene, the passive, tragic protagonist finally takes action, deciding, on his own terms, that it is time to go.

## §

I end up choosing a simple blue button-down and a pair of casual slacks. I thank the salesman as he slides the shopping bag across the counter. The plastic digs into my hands from the weight.

# ABANDONED LOT

Austen Smith

The abandoned lot is a free parking lot overlooking a deserted part of the Ohio River. Colossal flood walls and ribbons of spaghetti junction enshroud the area. The concrete blocks out the sun. It is dark, cold, and unkempt. Parking downtown is expensive, and I need to save money, so I chose this sketchy location. Safety wasn't a concern. When people see a Black, transmasculine person walking from the shadows of an abandoned lot, their first instinct isn't to come closer.

A few months ago, I parked my car there for the first time. I shut my engine off, buttoned the top of my men's dress shirt, ruffled my locs, and put my earbuds in. I always perform this ritual before getting out of the car. In that decrepit lot it seemed more like a plea. A secular sign of the cross. I stepped out of the car and walked the four city blocks to my office.

The elevator delivered me to my floor. I was esteemed and confident. I spread the word in hopes of convincing everyone in my office to park there and save money too. One of my coworkers, Nikki, doesn't feel comfortable parking in the lot, "I parked there once, and I saw two people fucking in the car next to mine."

I met the concern in her voice with laughter. Maybe they just wanted a quickie?

She continued, “It didn’t feel right. It startled me and I really needed to make sure it was consensual.”

I was disappointed with my response to Nikki’s experience. On several occasions throughout my life my consent did not matter. It was irresponsible to assume car sex in an abandoned parking lot is consensual. I spent the rest of my work day wondering what I would have done in Nikki’s position. My walk back to the abandoned lot was filled with self-criticism and observation. I am transmasculine, but in an attempt not to completely lose my femininity, I identify as non-binary. However, society doesn’t care about the complexities of intersectional identity. Society dances with my masculine appearance and deems it my truth.

I parked in the same spot the next day. I buttoned my collar, ruffled my locs, and plugged in my earbuds. This time my walk was void of confidence. My feet were heavy with guilt. Implicit bias for once, was working in my favor. People wouldn’t bother me precisely because, at a distance, I pass as a Black man. Who knew liberation would be this isolating? This disappointing?

The veracity of my safety is tethered to masculinity. And I love my masculinity. I’m respected on merit. My professional life is thriving. My creative process is honored. I’m not expected to smile at strangers. Or move off the sidewalk. But after my reaction to Nikki’s experience, none of that seemed to matter. What was initially comforting is now bringing me closer to toxic masculine social practices.

Months later, I'm still parking in the abandoned lot. I've added a new step to my car ritual: fastening a circular black and gold button to my collar. It reads, "Please Use They/Them Pronouns." Wearing the pin is not the answer, but it reminds me that no one is safe in the fellowship of patriarchy. Especially unsafe are Black bodies with vaginas. I refuse to comply with a structure that can stand to attack, maim, and kill the most vulnerable of our society. I embrace my femininity because it's a part of me. My clothing choice does not change that in the same way that biology doesn't invalidate my masculinity. When walking those four city blocks, I don't wipe the smile from my face or neutralize my sway. Masculinity is still new, so I'm learning how to create social opportunities that center the femme and non-binary experience. I don't identify as male, but I know I look like one to most people. Because of this social proximity, I am learning how to demonstrate what masculinity would look like if it weren't toxic, if it weren't violent, and if it weren't running on the physical and emotional labor of people who dare to be feminine in an abandoned lot.

# TO GIRLS WHO WALK LIKE WOMEN

Riece Hamilton

I knew from an early age I was attractive. I was other things too, but you don't see intelligence and good character from the outside. Men leered, old men. Other girls hated me, friends thought of me as competition. My looks entered the room before any other part of me and lingered too long to let the rest of me make an impression.

Every passing encounter I felt myself fall deeper into the trap of thinking beauty was all I had to get by on in this world. A fleeting talent. I began to dread introductions and the inevitable "you're so [insert physical praise as a compliment here]."

I would stand in the mirror, scrutinizing every blanche or mark that would come from the everyday dealings of an elementary aged kid. The recent purple, oblong burn from the iron. The big brown scrape on my knee from falling off my bicycle. That will never do. I'd frown at the child in the mirror; thinking to myself, Who would want to marry someone who wasn't perfectly beautiful? My brother, rough and tumble, had war wounds from sports and dredging through cypress swamps. Cuts from using rusty blades found in the back of the woods behind the house. His body riddled with

broken skin stories to tell and keloids of character. Men did not need to worry about the perfection of their skin.

My mother was the opposite of me. My hair was a long and curly tangled mess. My mother's hair was permed and short, surviving years of chemical relaxation and heat from professional irons. She was a hair stylist which meant I suffered many a day in a beauty shop chair being prepped as a walking advertisement. Her breast would droop and almost smother me over the shampoo bowl, victims of gravity and the trauma of bearing two children. Her acrylic nails would scratch away at my scalp and I would wonder how all of the rigorous maneuvers performed with her fingers day by day could leave her nail polish unscathed.

Her makeup lived on the dresser, neighbors to the quarters for school lunch and the large white bottle of Hydroxy-cut. I knew what that bottle was, I had seen the commercials. I had heard my mother call herself fat and compare herself to the women on TV. Flawless skinned women without bruises from first bicycle rides. Women who probably didn't keep weight loss pills next to their Chanel lipstick.

She clipped my ends and cut my eyebrows. She told me to marry not for love, but security. She called me princess. My looks will get me everywhere. I sweep hair in her salon, head down. I hear her. I don't believe her.

§

I have fifteen minutes to get to a place thirty minutes away. I change my clothes because my mood doesn't match the vision in the mirror. ten minutes is not enough time to tame the complexities of natural hair. No time to walk the dog. Filling his water bowl, being careful not to spill any on the wood floors or the lifeless t-shirt I chose to hide my figure. Six minutes. Makeup. With this look? Three minutes in the mirror it takes for me to realize that it is not just my reflection that was ugly. My brain was also infected with the poison apple that didn't fall far from the rotten tree planted years ago. Snow White's alarm clock had finally woken her. And she was late.

# STRANGE BITTEN FRUIT

Kennita Ballard

While sitting in the McDonald's drive-thru, my mother asked me if I was having sex. And by asked, I mean accused. Don't ask me where it came from, I had just ordered a sweet tea and somehow that action had merited a gynecological Spanish Inquisition. But every once in a while, Mommy would play these Art of War mind games in the guise of parenting, where she would set me up for these win-lose situations. This, actually, had not been the first time that she asked, but all those other times were more like a rattler's warning, just a faint hint of the disappointment that would come if I ever answered yes.

This time I answered yes.

I could have lied, but that response would have still been tantamount to a win-lose situation. She would have gotten the response and the fear she wanted, and I would have been left with the burden of shame because I had lost my virginity. But at that moment, something snapped. Or, rather, maybe something broke. But I hadn't done anything wrong; I'd simply made a choice.

I think there is a certain fear inherent to birthing and bringing up daughters. It's this deeply-seated seed of Eve-ian knowledge of having to learn that being possessed, tempted,

tricked, and punished is women's genesis. I think my Mom thought she had circumvented her Abrahamic calling by never allowing me to get to the point where I would be a woman. If she could have preserved me in a state of not knowing she would have, but biology had other plans for me. My body prepared my death march towards womanhood with a rapidly increasing bust and widening hips. Signs my mother kept hidden from the world in the latest Pentecostal fashions. She tried, she tried, she tried. She gave, she gave, she gave. My Mommy devoted her daily breath to preserving me as a child, should womanhood pass over. My bedroom, even into my college years, was a tupperware of girlhood in shades of powder blues, a princess canopy, glow-in-the-dark stars, and the ever-growing menagerie of pastel stuffed animals. There was a certain safety net in this illusion.

Make-believe was the currency my Mommy used to remain the primary shareholder over myself. My Mom already had me believing and accepting Santa Claus's series of breaking and enterings as Christmas magic, she really didn't have to do that much extra work to get me to believe that my hymen was some kind of mystical, diamond-encrusted vaginal tiara. So then, at the age of twenty eight, when I snapped that metaphorical tiara in half, could I really have been mad at my mother for suggesting that I had become something of a slut when she had invested so much of her time, energy, and efforts (and lies) into protecting me from what she described as a "world of diseases and disappointments"?

## §

And for the cost of this choice, I found myself loading my baggage onto a Chinatown bus departing Eden, but, when all was said and done nearly a year later, when the initial relationship had gone the way of my virginity, I called my Mommy. I had buried myself into the crevice of my fold-out futon to cry, but my Mommy had managed to make out the very wet sounding muffled news. In a way that only my Mommy could, she both gleefully and with disappointment asked me a question, with my life now a parable to the woes of lust, “Was it worth it in the end?” In a performative act of penance, but with no other choice, I responded, “No.” It might have been the truth or it might not have been the truth, but it was a fig leaf of an answer to cover myself in what I’d done.

# MEMORIES OF AN ACTIVIST

Meredith Pass

This is not a story about how I had an abortion, because I've never had one. This story is the story of how I became an activist.

I was watching television during the day and a "Right to Life" commercial appeared on the screen. I don't remember much about the commercial except that there was a dismembered fetus. I was nine years old. I had just been watching a children's television program when, unexpectedly, this really horrible thing appeared in front of my eyes that I did not understand. A feeling of confusion and disgust washed over me. I told my mother when she got home from work, and she was furious. The image of an aborted fetus is not something that is easily explained to a child. She called the local television station, demanding to know why they had chosen to air this commercial. Specifically, why had they chosen to air it during the daytime? She didn't get an answer, but it made me proud that she had tried to do something to get the commercial taken off the air.

I was 19 years old the first time I volunteered as a clinic escort. It was a cold morning in January as I strategically put on layer after layer of clothing, making sure I would stay warm. The sound of freshly fallen snow crunched under my boots as I walked to my friend's car. We parked at 2nd and

Market and walked to the local abortion clinic, which is now the last abortion clinic in the state of Kentucky. Before that day I had very little knowledge of what abortion was or why people had abortions. Thinking back, I wonder if it was naivety or the fact I was still a virgin. Growing up in a middle-class, Jewish family, my parents were open and honest about sex. I had just never thought about what would happen if someone got pregnant and what they would do if they could not have the baby.

Saturday morning at 7:00 a.m., standing there wearing my orange vest, I heard protestors yell such horrible things at clients. "Don't kill your baby." "Don't do this, honey!" "You have other options!" I wanted to make them all disappear, but I couldn't do that. Instead, I calmly told the client that the protestors would be gone by the time they left there that day. By being there, I was telling those clients walking into the clinic that I supported their decision.

It was a scary, frustrating feeling watching the protestors shove literature and little plastic baby fetus' into clients faces as we walked through the gauntlet of people praying while holding crosses, rosary beads draping their hands. The fact that these people thought that they had the right to tell someone they should have a baby that they did not want to keep infuriated me. Why is it in our society we put the fetus's "life" as more important than the person carrying the fetus?

That morning, as I used my body and my voice to help clients get to the clinic doors safely, it made me feel like I had

made a difference in someone's life. I was tired, cold, and yet I knew that I wanted to do this again, because I knew that, if I were getting an abortion, I would want someone there walking with me. I truly believe no matter who you are, you should always have the right to choose when you are ready to have a child and parent that child. This is a human right every single person should have, and no one should be able to take that away from you.

That day, standing on the sidewalk, something inside me shifted. I wasn't shy hiding in the background. I knew I was exactly where I was supposed to be. I saw a car pull up to the meter and walked quickly down the sidewalk. As the client rolled down the window, I smiled and said, "Hi my name is Meredith. I'm here with the clinic. Would you like me to walk with you?"

# HOME

Amy Shah

My parents immigrated to America in the 1970s before I was born. It was my father's dream to have a farm. Something in him felt alive while gardening. Mother used to joke, "Your dad likes plants more than people." My brother and I would laugh, noting the deep kernel of truth in the flippant statement. Our red brick home had a rather new black roof. One hundred acres of farmland surrounded it. My dad had bought a rickety home and transformed it with a new roof. I heard from my mother that it took a lot to make the farmhouse livable. The home sat in a valley, though it was elevated on a slight hill. The mountains to either side had pine trees decorating them. As the breeze flowed through the trees, the pine trees danced in the wind. The area around the home was green and fertile. Outside the windows, my dad planted azaleas and geraniums. Hummingbirds would visit the bushes to drink the nectar of the flowers. My brother and I would watch as the wings of the birds flitted so quickly we could not see them. It was a wild place where I played in the creek next to a chestnut tree and where snakes hid in the grass. Danger was always nearby, but somehow we were safe under the watchful eye of my parents.

My parents' friends invited them to several parties. One day, they wanted to reciprocate the invitation by having a

small party at our home. Several of the Indian families they invited had children, and I was looking forward to the party. In anticipation, I picked out some clothes for the event and my mother let me wear some makeup, though I was only seven years old. I played with the makeup, not knowing how to use it, and then applied heavy amounts of rouge to my face. The families and children came at the appointed time. My mother had prepared a large amount of traditional food. The guests ate and drank delicious, warm bhatt and savory kadhi. Some women had worn dressy Indian saris. Afterwards, my father took the group on a tour of the farm. Down the dirt paths we walked, and my dad opened the electric fence of the farm's main drag. This electric fence kept the cattle from getting lost and spilling onto the gravel road.

I walked along the path with my father. I looked at the faces of the guests and noticed their disgust at the cow patties, dirt, and animals. The women gingerly lifted the hems of their beautiful silk saris. We stopped near the basin filled with rainwater where the cows drank. I was dismayed to see all the guests and their children bored looking. I was so proud of my home. I had never seen their homes, though I had been to my uncle's "castle." It was a three-story mansion furnished with expensive paintings and fragile vases. A large swath of white carpeted the first floor. The brick walls of the mansion were white, giving it the appearance of a castle in my childhood eyes. I felt shame about the animals and the overgrown grass. I looked into the water of the rain basin

and saw my heavily painted face in the reflection. I looked like a clown. The experience bothered me so much for many years that I did not invite people to my home for a very long time.

We left the farm after a few years, but it stayed in our family. Some time later, I went back to the neglected place and remembered my childhood there. I could not see the beauty in what was mine and appreciate what I had when I was a child. It was like the old Indian saying my mother told me: "Don't tear your hut down because you see someone else's mansion." Now, I bring guests to my small apartment in the city and don't bother cleaning beforehand. I am so grateful just to have a place to live, a place to call home. The pretensions of fine furnishings are lost on me because I have realized a woman's home is her castle.

# THE LAND I LOVE

Katy Harvey

Something about fallen trees spells destruction. I see trees lying on their sides and immediately think of natural disasters—of death—even when I know they were deliberately and methodically cut down. While in town for my childhood friend Elise’s wedding earlier this year, I visited my parents and was surprised to find many of the trees on our farm in this state. “Timber,” my father explained matter-of-factly. Another way to pay the bills. I said nothing, quietly dismayed by the sight of the trees—those I climbed and read beneath as a child—gone or crushed beneath their fallen neighbors. The familiar trails unrecognizable.

This change in the landscape startled me because I once knew our farm forwards and backwards; it was my favorite place on earth. My friend Elise and I would spend hours trekking through the woods where our cattle roamed. The first time Elise visited, she and her mother got lost several times on the thirty-minute drive from town. I remember the look on her mother’s face as they drove up the pothole-ridden, dirt road that led to our farm. It was an expression I could not read at the time, but, years later, I would know it as being uncomfortable with one’s surroundings.

Our house was small. I knew that much. Its quirks, like the unfinished ceilings and holes in the floor covered with

door mats, were not unusual to me. It was Elise's three-story house with its multiple bathrooms that eventually led me to realize my house was not simply unique, but rather evidence of poverty. Elise's mother often corrected me when I said things that were incorrect or colloquial. Embarrassed, I spoke less. Elise and I drifted apart for a while, as she was drawn to activities that I could not afford. I stopped inviting friends over and, to spare my parents' feelings, gave vague excuses when asked why. My parents were loving and supportive, but I began bearing the ugly weight of resentment.

Our farm did little to support us financially, and I suspected that my father's choice of profession had more to do with quixotic nostalgia than it did practicality. I did not understand why my father would be a fifth-generation farmer when he knew it was unprofitable, and I did not understand how both of my parents could be content with so little. I left for college on a scholarship at eighteen, determined to never live in my hometown again.

I stood among the fallen tree limbs this year, saddened to see barren stumps where landmarks once stood, but what claim did I have to the land I'd tried so hard to hide? I thought about the future as I stood there—the future where my parents are gone and someone else tends to the land I grew up loving. Or worse, where someone tears down the house and forgets the land altogether. I think of these things now and wonder how I can do anything other than cling to this place and all the

things I miss: the emptiness, the dust, the frogs, the crickets, and the largest sky I've ever seen.

I am reminded that I miss being alone, and that I'm never as alone as I would like to be in my apartment in the city. I wonder who I would be if I had grown up anywhere else, but I wonder who I would be if I had stayed. After spending years in school to prepare for a stable career I care little about, I surprise myself by wanting, in some ways, to be more like my father—the man who perseveres in doing what he loves even when it seems unwise to do so. My father who holds my mother's hand as they watch the chickens in the yard and who still sheds a tear when he has to sell the livestock he raised. Did he shed a tear when he cut down the trees? Maybe so. I may never be a farmer, but I know what it means to be a lover and keeper of the land. This is the one thing my father and I share.

