

**SOMETIMES GOOD THINGS HAPPEN**

**SARABANDE WRITING LABS, VOL. 14**

# 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 six 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, *Sometimes Good Things Happen*.

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



# BEARANOIA

Arielle Christian

I'm smoothing a space for my tent when I find the bone. Small, some remnant of a past camper's roasted rotisserie, I guess. Fancy, but did they forget that this is Montana—grizzly home, grizzly kitchen? That the bear can smell 20 miles away? That it rips off car doors with the scent of a sweet-coated Tylenol pill?

I'm alone here on a get-the-hell-outta-Kentucky-and-heartache road trip in the last camp spot I could find. The sun's quieting its tones. Tired, I toss the bone.

If there's an animal stalking me, it sees me make fool of the fire. My twig tipi flat and pathetic after three attempts. Before, this was Mike's task. He was so tender with the tinder, so meticulous. Now, my dog steals my sticks and I shoosh her away. I'm in a very concentrated hunch. I'm adding another wrong angle. I'm a perfectionist, and this isn't working. I'm probably easy prey.

A bottle of bear spray—like mace for monsters—knocks my side as I shuffle the fire pit. I haven't seen the bear, but it's somewhere, everywhere. The bear keeps me away from the splendor and shush of backcountry. I stick to shorter trails, families bustling.

Same with my spiritual path. I go inward, but never too deep. Instead, I drink, twirling around all witty and shit.

Been like this since 13, an only child growing up on MTV, growing insecure. First it was Smirnoff, then vodka. Drinking, I feel better connected. On the first legs of this trip, I was whiskey-breathed in Colorado with anarchist poets, then beer-buzzed in Wyoming with some ranchers. I settled into those worlds with relative ease. My voice dumb, I'd rather listen than speak.

Swigging wine, I try to convince myself that I'm capable of being solo. I've plopped myself in this wild, I know. Sometimes I experience peace. Earlier, I wrote at the Gallatin River's edge and the water was clear and I felt clear. I'm thankful for each mountain, waterfall. Otherwise—nah. Twenty-six years I've lived like a forest full of shame, looking outward for validation. Outward: I see the good in everyone but me. My mind is a haze of doubt and disquiet. To be alone is to cut to the bone. I'm brave enough to be out here, but am I brave enough to be?

Twilight, and my pup walks up with a bone bigger than her shepherd-mix body. Deer bone. Leg bone. Hairy hoof. The red of a not-quite-licked-clean knee tendon. "Where did you get that?" I say, seriously. I do not want to be near death as this could bring me nearer the bear. "Leave it," I say, and make a small perimeter around my campsite to search for the source.

Nothing in the pine grove except bush tangle, the berries blood red. Nothing where I collected wood back when the



sun was high and happy. Then—they—the carcasses. A boulder curves over the hollow of deer ribs. A good shelter. A haunt. The smell of death catches the breeze. The scene reminds me of a sign I saw at a trailhead earlier. It warned hunters to remove game as quickly as possible, that grizzlies know gunshots mean meat.

What will I say to the bear when it comes for me? Will I scream? Will its 600 pound body overwhelm me? Later this summer, I'll read that only the body-centered ego concerns itself with death, the soul knowing it lives eternally. I'll sleep with a bear fur-covered pillow—some kinda exposure therapy—realizing how much I need its totem spirit of strength and courage.

For now, I want to crawl in the deer ribs open like a mouth, saying, Calm, child. I know your emptiness, deer. I've picked myself clean. I remember Bob Dylan's "To Ramona": "There's no one to beat you . . . defeat you . . . 'Cept the thoughts of yourself feeling bad."

I'm not sure what I'm doing as I grab a tarp, then femur, fibula. I scream to the stars, "PLEASE ALLOW ME TO MOVE THESE BONES, I AM ASKING YOUR PERMISSION," because that seems right, respectful. I fold in the tarp edges and lift.

The bones are heavy hanging over my shoulder. I start toward the nearby gravel road, toward the river. A car passes and I freeze, embarrassed. I am a bad Santa. My heart beats loud. The water rushes. With one big sweep, I toss the bones

downhill. They make music of the bushes, of themselves.

In the belly of my car, scrunched, uncomfortable. In my dreams, the bear is always running. Not toward me, but quickly, desperately. Come morning, I'll wake, my bones aching, but alive.

# FLIES AND SUCH

Chandra Poole

It was the flies. How they crawled on the flesh without interruption. Even crawled on the white mush hand scooped out of dirty bowls and placed into mouths. Flies walking on lips.

“Cain’t ney kill awlanem flies?” I asked. I looked back at my older cousin sitting on the couch dribbling a basketball.

“Cuz, dey Africun. An dats how dey live,” he replied.

I shook my head in disbelief. “Dey nasty,” I told him.

“If dey nasty, you nasty. Cuz you Africun too!” he taunted.

That was the first time I had heard that in all my seven years. I looked at the television again. The flies. The ashiness. The nappy hair. The crying white woman. The swollen bellies. Clearly, I was not African. I lived in Kentucky. I used lotion. I ate pizza and chicken nuggets regularly. I was not that dark. And, I killed flies.

“I ain’t no Africun, I’m Black,” I told him.

“You is,” he responded.

“I ain’t,” I yelled.

It was the German’s smugness. How it persisted past patience inside one of Beijing’s trendy expatriate bars.

“Where are you from?”

“The United States”

“Really?”

I nodded.

“And your family?”

“Kentucky”

“Before that?”

“Perhaps Mississippi.”

Shaking his head, he stepped closer to me. “No darling, where in Africa?”

I shifted from my left to right foot and shrugged my shoulders, “I am American.”

“But where is your root? You are African, too.”

I scanned the room. A fly in a large pitcher of buttermilk. I sighed and briefly explained the Middle Passage. I told him that I was as American as my white colleague standing beside me, who also has a root somewhere else.

“I speak Swahili fluently. My wife is Ugandan. My children are half. You should meet her. She can talk to you about Africa.”

I remembered my sister’s directive to say “I came from my mama’s twat” the next time a stranger inquired about my ancestry. I smiled, and excused myself to the bar.

It was the drums. On the other side of the plaza, a band played. The forceful drummer distracted me from my conversation.

“So, you liked the class?” Tiago asked. He was thrilled to practice English with Americans.

“Yesss,” my colleague responded enthusiastically. It was hot, and we were sweaty and tired from our African dance

class. I tried to focus, but the rhythm changed. It was slow and hypnotic. My eyes went back to the drummer, and closed in submission. My body glided across its rhythm. When it was over, I opened my eyes and re-entered the conversation. Tiago was watching me.

“Do you know that song?” he asked me.

“No, this is my first time hearing it.”

He tugged a few of his long dreads before sweeping them to the back of his head. “Then, you understand the words?”

“No.”

His head tilted right. He studied me. He smiled. He could be from Kentucky. He could have been a college crush that I ogled while he strolled with his bruhs.

“This is a song we play to honor Oxum, one of our orixas. We believe that she is all things beauty and love. We sing this song to honor her and we remember that we are African. And we do a dance for her. You just did that dance. Maybe she is your orixa.”

I told him that I did not grow up learning about orixas in Kentucky.

“No matter. You are African, your ancestors carry your orixas to guide you.” he said. I imagined Grannie flanked by protective orixas posthumously reclaiming our African identity. No crying white women, swollen bellies, ashy elbows, or flies.

§

It was the braids. Long ass black cornrows with blonde tips. They are called Formation or Beyonce braids. Some people call them Fulani braids. Named for the Fula people who are one of the largest ethnic groups in west Africa. A significant portion of enslaved Africans brought to the United States were Fulani. They clandestinely brought Islam to the slave quarters. Their traces can be found in our braiding patterns, and the direction some of our oldest churches face.

“Yasss, who did them braids? The Africans?” a stranger asked me in Target. She could have been my play cousin. We could have grown up playing Barbies together and arguing over which member of New Edition was cuter.

“Thank you. No ma’am. They braid too tight. She Black,” I responded.

She nodded affirmatively, “Them Africans will pull outcha roots.”

“Gurl. I try not to go to them anymore for braids. It’s too much.”

“They hair be damaged underneath,” she responded. “Running around here wit no edges. A mess. But, they look good girl.”

She bid me goodbye to finish her shopping. I was halfway down the bath towel aisle before I caught myself.

# HOW TO MOTHER

Jardana Peacock

It was July 10th, two days before my 39th birthday. The ferry eased into the dock and my lover and I joined the other island tourists, laden with gear. Broad tongued ferns greeted us, framing the winding path to the campsite.

The beach was pristine. The dunes hugged golden grasses to their hips. A child anchored herself to a patch of damp sand. Her single yellow bucket sparkled. In the blaze of yellow, an unwanted thought took over: I will not tuck my children into sleep every night. It was the first summer my kids were away with their father for a month.

My feet sank into the ground. I would miss some of their growing up; there would be parts of me they wouldn't know. The sun glared overhead. What would they shed about who they were this summer? What would we need to relearn about each other? What if they preferred their father's love to mine? Questions attacked me like a swarm of mosquitos to bare flesh. The warm ocean took my body. The yearning for them grew as the waves rocked me hard.

When I met my soon to be ex-husband, I'd been outwardly queer for three years. He was wearing mermaid blue toenail polish and cooking kale and I convinced myself I could be in

a relationship with a man like him. No sooner had I said yes to the idea and I was pregnant.

I didn't use the word mother; I was my children's parent. My ex was the maternal one. When the swarms of family and community descended upon us after my first son was born, I offered him up to everyone else and realized six months later how uncertain he felt in my arms. He reached for me but I rarely rocked him. This was how I'd learned to parent. After all, my own mother had balanced three kids, multiple jobs, and home responsibilities--she rarely moved outside of a schedule of cook, clean, laundry. Repeat.

At my second child's birth, I immediately took him onto me and let him feel the rise and fall of my breath, my touch. I cradled him for fifteen whole minutes before family flooded in.

"Isn't this the best time of your life?" I faked a smile. I felt a tug. The truth was, I didn't know how to mother.

Throughout my own childhood, my mother led a secret life. However, I picked up on bits and pieces. Her concern in the phone receiver at night, worried about the bills. How she pushed us into the house when my drunk father wailed in the front yard. She took care of us, she loved us but I never knew her. This is how I had learned to mother.

The next day, my lover and I camped a little further into the jungle. Our only relief from the stinging bites of the



quarter-sized mosquitoes was the ocean. The waters were cool and the beach empty. We swam naked. Soothing water kissed away the swollen welts.

My divorce was brutal. We decided to split the time with the kids; everything would be one half of what it used to be.

On the taupe beach, foam shells lingered where the ocean's waves once crested. I had wanted to be here without my kids; however, I'd never missed them more. I was the one who suggested we each have a month solo with them and one apart from them. In my search for space away from them had I sacrificed the bonds between us? I had been pushing them through the same schedule I grew up inside of, cook, clean, laundry. Repeat. In many ways I had been hiding from myself and from them all their lives. I dragged myself from the ocean's pull. The sand burned my feet. My naked body dried in moments.

I awoke before dawn. I was 39. We hiked back to the dock along the shore to avoid mosquitoes. The sunrise was a rose quartz hymn across the sky. Three wild horses nibbled at the dunes. I stopped to take in the scene, my youngest loves horses, my oldest loves the sunrise.

At the dock, tree limbs dipped low around me in an embrace. I thought I'd come here for escape but discovered instead, I wanted closeness.

On the ferry, my body fell against the hardness of the boat's cabin. The sun was gentle and a pod of dolphins weaved alongside us as the captain navigated calm waters. The ocean rocked my body with a low hum, a lullaby. I decided, I will let my children know me, the messy parts and the contradictions, the softness and fierceness of my heart. This is how I will mother.

# SOMETIMES GOOD THINGS HAPPEN

n. b.

With just enough clouds to make the heat bearable, at the call of distant drums, crashing cymbals, and triumphant trombones, Granny and I ventured outside the house. Excited, I skipped alongside the stern enigma I had never been close to. No one else, surprisingly, had been home, so there was no one to compete with, nothing to hurry back to, and what, I thought, was all the time in the world. This was the best day of my entire nine years on earth, the fifth of sixteen that would be endured in that three-bedroom apartment in Northwest, D.C. Most were spent with four other adults and six other children.

Four generations came of age in that place. It wailed under the weight of inherited wounds, long-held resentments, and ongoing strife. Thankfully, only the bathroom was small. The wide hallway was long enough for short little legs to enjoy a good run from the front door to our grandparents' bedroom where, sometimes, good things happened. With its cream-colored paper shades and doiled furniture, that back-room was a refuge – or prison – for each of us depending on her mood, and what our grandmother thought we needed.

It smelled of Pond's face cream, Jergen's lotion, Vick's Vapor-Rub, and Dixie Peach hair grease. I still have the, almost, antique dresser, and mirror, a chest of drawers, and an end table. They respect secrets. When all was good, after she slathered cream on her face, made her novenas, and, sometimes, talked on the phone with the few women lucky enough to be called friends, Granny would tell incredible stories while we kids bartered for the first chance at brushing her shiny black hair. Granddaddy sat by the window. Settled in his black easy chair, he read the newspaper, balanced his bank book, and suspiciously peered through his glasses at the comings and goings of the busy streets below.

Chaos, often, filled the rest of our home. Me and my older sister's children were close in age, and rambunctious. The grown-ups, choking on the bile of undeclared truths, regularly threatened our cacophony of unappreciated creativity. Although I usually hid in a paperback world of lost gardens, sea adventures, unrequited love, and murder mysteries, in the days when children were to be seen and not heard, I always had an opinion on everything. Thus, I thought of myself as the bane of existence among the adults around me. I was called "Mouth Almighty Tongue Everlasting" and warned that "One day everyone would read about me in the papers;" an event not to be desired.

But on that glorious parade-day, my grandmother and I discovered each other for the first time.

Nearing the spectacle, we squeezed through the swelling crowd to get a better look. There was the marching band we'd heard from a couple of blocks away and there were the baton twirling girls, prancing horses, and men in tall red hats with gold tassels. "Look Granny, look!" I shouted. When we got to the curb, I hopped along, one foot in the street, and one on the sidewalk, trying to keep pace with the revelers strutting down the middle of the avenue. At some point, I almost tumbled into the sewer. Snatching me up, Granny said, "Watch yourself, Dahlene." That was a nickname she used sparingly. Gratefully, I pressed against her hip for one stretched-out moment.

When I smiled, she smiled; when I laughed, she laughed; when I danced, she danced. We even shared a big snow cone. "I have enough change for one," she said in that matter-of-fact tone that not even I questioned. The raspberry covered ice between us melted as we followed the parade along several long city blocks. The silence (hers) and chatter (mine) that bled from tension at home, here, became gifts that I knew might never be unwrapped again.

As the festivities wound down, clouds broke, thunder clapped, and rain fell. Granny's casual clasp became a tight grip, and we both whispered, "Oooh, the angels are crying cuz the devil is beating his wife." Giggling at the synchronicity between us, we headed home, only stopping at the corner store for milk. In the short, quick stride from that store to

our home, Granny said softly, "My grandmother took me to a parade once." The apartment door flung open before I could utter even one of the questions forming in my little head.

Drenched in a rapidly disappearing day, our secret was lost in that tumultuous house where everyone had, already, started clamoring for her attention. Until a hard healing showed up in my swiftly approaching adulthood, my grandmother and I were, still, not close. We never talked about that day; maybe she thought of it, sometimes, with a wry delight. I still do.

# HOME

Danielle Smith-Tweddell

I left Germantown, a neighborhood I dearly loved where people would walk out onto their porches and give my dog treats. We waved hello to neighbors as we pushed strollers over broken glass and chased each other's loose dogs through hilly backyards. It reminded me of where I grew up: Older homes breathing history, our friends the blue and white collar workers inhabiting them. But my son's crib stood in the living room of our shotgun home. After six months of sleepless nights, I said "That's it" and we moved in the dead of winter to the most affordable brick ranch we could find in Okolona. Others raise their eyebrows saying, "Oh my" as if I'd made the wrong decision. Not the cool part of town? Or the wealthy one? I shrugged it off with, "Music degrees don't pay for themselves. Student loans, you know."

This fall we'll apply to schools for our son. The choices are overwhelming. I grew up in a small community where I attended the schools my father had. Big questions loom: Are schools in affluent communities actually better? What makes a good school? Can I move my son away from our neighbor Frank, the man who built him a sandbox and he considers his friend?

Frank has always taken care of the people who have lived in our house. He found Marie with a broken hip in the basement after he hadn't seen her in two days. He still has pictures of Chris and Chelsea's wedding. He's designated himself the neighborhood watchman who sleeps with a police scanner by his bed. When my car broke down in a storm and I couldn't reach my husband, Frank rapped on our bedroom window to wake him.

When I take my son to the park to play on the swings, I hear the melodic phrasing and cadences of languages that are new to me. I reach over and push one of the girls on the swing who asks, "Push, please?" At the community pool a young boy yells "Uno mas!" as he cannonballs. "What's your name?" I ask.

"Giovanni," he says.

Because of this cultural diversity I have always craved, I question moving to a more affluent and homogenous neighborhood that has "good schools." My son would miss out on other perspectives; I want that for him.

Leaving Germantown with its cracked sidewalks and church steeples that poke their necks above the skyline of tiny bungalows has left a scar. For months afterward, I had a recurring dream where I searched for my old house in a fog, but I never found it. I yearned for a simpler time, before my thinking became clouded with things like "family-friendly home," fear, guilt, and proving my value. Some days I wake



up in my suburban brick home indistinguishable from all the others, with a beige couch and beige carpet, and I worry that I've become indistinguishable as well. Motherhood and moving unraveled me and forced me to tell the truth. The truth is that I don't know where I belong anymore. I grew up in a home and drove on country roads that my family built. I feel rootless in a large city.

One evening in early summer, Frank wandered over to our yard, as he usually does. My son was playing in the dirt under the large maple tree. He handed me back the tupperware that held barbeque I had made the night before. We headed into Frank's garage, and my son and I made ourselves comfortable in a lawn chair while Frank sat on his bar stool. We talked on the commercial break from the Nascar race he was watching. "What time do you want to leave for your cataract surgery in the morning?" I asked.

"Ummm. 6:30," he said.

The hum of the engines took me back to every Sunday of my childhood when my dad would watch races. The grinding of rubber and cement was so soothing. I ran my hand across my son's head and we watched silently. In the comfort of the hot garage, with the avocado green fridge stocked with strawberry popsicles, I wondered how we could ever move away from this man, the rescuer who had become our family.

The loneliness and isolation I sometimes feel on the southernmost edge of town is palpable. How can I feel centered

in a part of town that has no town center? Yet somewhere between living in the past and planning for our future, this had become our home. Where my son took his first steps. Where my dog died on the living room floor. Where we play baseball in the backyard under the pink dogwood tree. This is where our life happens. And for today, this is our home.

# WISH

Morgan Everett

A few weeks after I had my second baby, my mother gave me news that was as predictable as it was shocking. She had cancer. She had developed lung cancer after smoking for forty years. Her own mother died of the disease in 2003. We stood in my childhood home, a comfortable brick Cape Cod, surrounded by her succulents and plants. She took me into her arms for a rare embrace. She told me—lied, I believe now—they had caught it early. She started chemotherapy right away, I hoped she would recover.

My mother was imperfect and odd, a recovering alcoholic with five cats for friends. My teenage years had been difficult, constant fighting that sometimes led me to live with friends for months at a time. We clashed over many things—Politics, personal grooming habits, the father of my children. We didn't have much in common other than books, Jeopardy!, and an interest in morbid news. We had reached a weird, awkward normalcy; she helped me raise my children, providing me with rent and other necessities. We were constantly together but we were never friends. We spent much of our time trying not to piss each other off. The friction was a fact of our relationship. I loved my mother, but I felt like I never understood her. We were a contradiction, close but constantly distant.

When Mom was diagnosed I was 23, and at 50, she was young for the affliction. I wish I could say that I spent more time with her. I wish I could say that I asked her about her childhood. I helped her around her house, and I was with her physically. But, we did not become closer. The strained, awkward relationship I had always known continued as she deteriorated and became sicker. Something was stuck or broken in our relationship. Hoping she would get better, but not knowing how to deal with this new distressing development in my life, I sat in my basement apartment. I watched HGTV. I binged on Netflix.

After several months of chemo, she developed a stomach infection. She called me from the hospital. Not wanting the kids, or me, to see her “like this,” she told me not to come. For the ten days she spent there, I didn’t see her. In a blur of numb guilt, knowing I should have visited her anyway, I stayed home with the television. As she fought off the bacteria invading her body I watched carnage on Game of Thrones. Trying to not think, to not accept reality, the television became an enabling friend.

That Thanksgiving we exchanged Christmas gifts, knowing she didn’t have much longer. In my mother’s bedroom, family surrounded her bed. She was gaunt, her skin tight around her face, eyes sunken in. She had been unable to keep much of anything down since returning home from the hospital, and we could all feel how close to death she was.

Heavily medicated and unable to talk she smiled at all of us, showing the teeth that had started to rot in the last month and a half. My kids, a bald baby and a blond toddler, opened their presents, excited for the unexpected treat of Christmas a month early, not realizing this was our time to say goodbye to Grandma.

I can't remember the last thing my mother said to me.

Having seen her in pain for several weeks, starving and dying, when she stopped breathing I felt a surreal relief. Seeing a person suffer is unpleasant, seeing your own mother suffer is torture.

A few months after, once she had been incinerated and placed in ceramic, I continued binge-watching television shows. I had somehow gotten through the funeral and real Christmas, continued my day-to-day duties as a mother myself. When I had free time, I wanted to escape. I had avoided talking to my mom about her dying, even as she died. She avoided me too, avoided saying goodbye and the truth of how sick she was.

I watched to continue avoiding thinking about the significance of her death. The realization of what I had done came from the maternal glow of the television screen; a blonde mother with a strained relationship with her daughter, diagnosed with lung cancer on an alliteratively titled period

drama. Everything about it reflected my own experience, and this freaked me out. Fantasy brought me back into harsh reality.

There's nothing special about being unable to communicate with my Mother. I had more time than many people had but let myself think that things would get better. I ache with regret, on Mother's day and my birthday. With envy, at women who still have their mothers.



