

# **MOTHER, OTHER**

words by women on bereavement

**SARABANDE WRITING LABS, VOL. 4**

# SARABANDE WRITING LABS

An Arts Education Program from Sarabande Books

Sarabande Writing Labs is an arts education program serving under-resourced communities in Kentucky through creative writing workshops.

## OUR MISSION

- **REACH** communities in Kentucky with traditionally fewer arts education opportunities.
- **TEACH** creative writing workshops characterized by enthusiasm and excellence.
- **CREATE** opportunities for positive, experiential learning in a supportive and respectful environment.
- **PROMOTE** diverse voices through free community readings.

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# Forward

Five years ago I went through an experience that left me profoundly depressed. I lost a much-wanted first pregnancy at 14 weeks, at the critical age of 35. At the time, I was studying for a Masters in Literature. As my classmates and I clung, brows furrowed, to the slow-beating hearts of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing, I was amazed to discover that even during the darkest, freshest moments of despair, like them, I felt the urge to write. In fact, when I couldn't articulate my grief to my family, pen and paper became my tools of survival.

One of my professors informed me that my process had a name: scriptotherapy. She told me women have been using it to heal for centuries—in letters to sisters, diary entries, to do lists – and encouraged me to write on. So I did, and as my work was published not only did I feel better, but other women who'd been through similar—or worse—situations came forward to thank me for my bravery and honesty.

Sharing pain—whether you are the writer or the reader—allows you to feel part of a collective whole. A fear of anyone who has been through a psychological trauma is that they are unique and no one can help, but writing allows us to unload the burden and reading it allows us to form healthy connections. This kind of visible introspection can offer a lifeline to victims of misfortune, like me.

How can we live with our pain but to write it, sing it, or talk

about it? This is what inspired me to teach writing for grieving mothers, here in Louisville, KY. Once a month, strong, heartbroken, kind women have gathered together to cry, share, write, and discuss each other's work.

The results are what you find in this beautiful anthology. Their hearts are written onto every page.

—Sarah Ivens

## Define Me Now

WHOLE: you are full of life

HOLE: the life is taken away

MOTHER: a grower, a feeder, a nurturer, a teacher

OTHER: what should you be called now?

If you lose your spouse = widow/widower

If you lose your parents = orphan

If you lose your child = there are no words.

Just

spaces and silences and awkward avoidances.

**MOTHER, OTHER**





# Being a Mother

My child's heart stopped beating  
But I never stopped being a mother  
When picking out her forever outfit  
for burial, I had to think  
Would she be too hot or too cold?  
Would the outfit be comfortable?  
Forever?

The first freezing day when snow started to fall  
I worried that she was cold  
I wanted so much to take her a jacket and a blanket  
My only solution was to cover her burial spot with  
love  
A child's heart may stop  
Being a parent never stops

—*Amy Elzy*

# Healing Old Wounds

The medical history questions always  
taunt me  
and  
haunt me.

Number of Pregnancies?  
Three.  
Number of live births?  
One

My answers reopen old wounds  
of heartache, sorrow, and guilt.  
Decades later I still mourn.  
Yearning for the children I lost  
before they were born

There remains a void in my heart.  
An emptiness carved out by a grief  
that was never allowed to be spoken.  
Left alone  
to deal with my pain in silence

Healing begins when I am willing  
to speak my truth  
and honor my sorrow  
To finally reach out and say  
this is what I lost so many years ago

Hoping that sharing my story  
will help other mothers know  
they are not alone  
Hoping my words help them to

repair their broken hearts

And hoping to finally  
mend my own broken heart as well.

—*Diane Cruze*

# As I Feel Myself Drowning

As I feel myself drowning in the chaotic yet mundane hours of motherhood, I can't help but feel the contradiction of my life. I constantly feel like I need more than this. More than days filled with hours of rushing the slowest moving kids in the world to and from school, negotiating the number of bites of chicken nuggets and processed mac 'n' cheese, arguing over whether or not tonight is in fact a shower night, packing book bags for daycare and 3rd grade, and feeling like I'm in a never-ending downward spiral to get it all done. I spend a lot of time wishing to be alone—those glorious bedtimes when I can finally be by myself and alone with my own thoughts.

Only sometimes I hate the feeling of it.

The silence. It can be deafening, and the feeling of having no one to chase after and care for can be pretty lonely. When I am alone, that's when the thoughts creep in, and there is no escape.

All I really want in this world is to be surrounded by all my children, but my daughter Vivian passed away, so I constantly feel like someone is missing from our everyday tasks. I would literally do anything to have my daughter be here and part of the chaos, to have her join in the very loud, off-key singing or the wild running or the yelling and crying with her big brother and little sister. It's strange that I can be so overwhelmed with my children, but at the same time feel like one is forever missing from our craziness.

In those quiet hours while I'm alone, my thoughts often revolve around unanswered questions. What would Vivian look like at

5 ½? Would she have the same brown hair that she was born with, or would she now be a blondie like her brother and sister? What kind of personality would she have? Laid back and taking things in stride like her big brother, or very particular about what she likes and not accepting anything less like her little sister? Does she wish she could be here with us as much as we do, or is she happy in heaven, shaking her head at our silliness in thinking that this life is the best one we will experience?

Sometimes, I spend so much time taking care of her brother and sister, that there is no time to really spend with her. But when I am alone with my thoughts, I can feel her. I can spend time with my memories of her and my wishes for what could have been.

It's been almost 5 years since my daughter died. Five years! I don't know how it is possible. I often wonder how I made it through so many days without Vivian. I wonder how I will make it through the days ahead of me without her. The time between now and then feels interminable. I wonder how the days can be flying by while time still moves so slowly until I am with her again. Is the time moving slowly for her too or will it feel like only an instant until I'm holding her in my arms again? With those last thoughts of the night, I fall into bed exhausted by the day and all my contradicting emotions, but grateful at the thought of it all happening again tomorrow.

—*Toni Arnold*

# Hayden

I am now three and a half years into my life as a grieving mother of four boys—three in my arms and one in my dreams. They all have my heart. It's felt like a roller coaster, and I assume it will always feel that way. But I'm ok with that.

I wouldn't want it to be all or nothing. Feeling pain from his loss is normal. So is smiling.

I may not be the same person I was three and a half years ago, and I may never be her again, but I survived the greatest loss and I live to tell people about it.

I still have very dark, sad moments.  
But the recovery happens faster.  
And the good days outweigh the bad.

In loving memory of Hayden

—*Ady Dorsett*

# My Story

I slowed my car to a stop as I approached the red light. In my peripheral, I caught the image of the lady in the car next to me. She was alone, shakily dabbing a tissue at the tears that streamed down her cheeks. The light changed and we drove our separate ways.

I wondered what her story was. Everyone has one.

What happened to cause her to shed tears in her car, while sitting in the midst of that busy intersection? What turmoil had she suffered?

I have a story. I have been that lady in the car who could no longer suppress the sadness. I recall forcing myself to pull off the road because my emotions demanded to surface. For a moment, I thought I was going to have to call my husband to retrieve me, but I managed to get myself together enough to safely make it home. In my story, I endured a pain that no mother should suffer and my son endured pain that no child should suffer.

Sean and I wanted a baby together but a baby was not happening. We invested \$26,000 into an in-vitro fertilization procedure and were blessed with a pregnancy of fraternal twins; a girl and a boy. We were ecstatic and petrified. Twins! TWO babies!?! We wasted no time in choosing names; Taylor Grace and Chance James.

As the pregnancy progressed, we were told that Chance's heart did not fully develop. Oh, but there were a series of heart surgeries that could help him potentially lead a normal life. It sounded like our lives were about to get complicated,

but little did we know what an understatement that was.

There is no way to summarize what we went through those next three years. We endured five heart surgeries, an emergency repair for perforation of his intestine, and a stomach surgery. I lost count of the number of times I got down on my knees and prayed to God to please just get my baby boy through this day.

On top of this I was a wife raising a teenager and Chance's twin sister. I continued to work a full time job as an HR Generalist. I learned to balance a baby on each hip while pointing my finger at my teenage son and attempting to cook a meal for my family. Sean would prepare Chance's medications and feedings for the evening. We learned more than we ever wanted to know about feeding tubes, oxygen, pacemakers, and heart monitors. Together, we learned what I call the three P's; prayer, patience, and perspective. It could always be worse.

My prayer had always been when it became too much pain for Chance that Jesus would take him home. That day arrived when Taylor and Chance were two years and nine months old. It was December 17, 2011. Chance had been in the hospital, this time, for 17 days. It started with a collapsed lung. In one week we went from thinking he would be home in time for Christmas to making the decision to let him go. His blood pressure dropped dangerously low. Medication was barely keeping it stable. He was placed on a ventilator to breathe for him. His kidneys were beginning to fail. We met with his doctor and made the heart-wrenching decision to stop the blood pressure medication.

My baby died about four hours later. I vividly recall kissing his little forehead, knowing it was for the very last time. He



was no longer warm, but he still smelled like my sweet and stinky little boy. I fingered his precious curls matted to the top of his head.

This is where I will begin my conclusion, but this is not where my story ends. We do not necessarily get to choose all that happens in our lives or our stories. We do, however, get to choose how our stories are written. I did not get to choose Chance's broken heart. Someone else authoring my story may have ended the story when he died, but I am writing this story and I refuse to let the story end with his death.

In my story, after Chance's Heavenly birth, we founded the Heart of Chance Toy Chest project. In my story, we celebrate his birthday along with his twin sister Tay, because he is still with us.

—*Susan Rademaker*

# My Heart Hurts

Our neighbors lost their daughter to cancer a few years ago. My heart ached for them as I watched them return home after she passed away. I could see and feel their sadness as they emerged from the car in their driveway and made their way to the front door, his arm around her shoulder as they looked down at the brick walkway. They were always friendly to us and waved or said hello if we were out in our yard. They were the first neighbors to invite us for dinner when we moved to the neighborhood.

There was a short fence that separated our back yards and a creek stone wall in between their driveway and our hydrangeas in the front yard. After their daughter died, we saw them less and less. They seldom looked our way when coming and going anymore.

Finally one day we spoke to Fred in his driveway as we were heading out for a walk and we were able to tell him in person how sorry we were for their loss. I had written a letter and brought over some soup, not knowing quite what to say or do. I remember saying to Fred, "I can only imagine what you and Lois are going through...I don't know what else to say." It must be the worst agony, and I wanted to somehow ease their minds with words. I wanted to know what I could do or what the "right" thing to say was.

He said "don't say you can imagine it. That's the worst thing you can say." His words ring in my mind to this day, all these years later. Of course I can't imagine losing one of my children. At the time, my older son was barely two. Even though I now have two healthy boys, I have felt the loss of a child; four to be exact.

The pain of my losses is different from my neighbors'. I never got to meet those children. There were a few years when I feared I would never have children of my own. That pain was unbearable. I felt like a failure, like I was being punished. Pregnancy loss is still loss.

My neighbor didn't know all that we had been through to get pregnant with our first son, so I didn't react negatively to his response. He was grieving. I have reflected on that moment and on how I could honor that time in my life when I lost my unborn children. They will always hold a piece of my heart. Like E.E. Cummings wrote, "I carry your heart with me. I carry it in my heart."

—*Marigny Bostock*

# Weston

For a child who wasn't supposed to live past a few days old, 7 and a half years is an amazing feat. Today, well, this morning at 1:24am, Weston celebrated his 1st birthday in heaven. In my mind, I know he is having a ball with his best friend, Megan. He is getting the yummiest goodies and having the best time.

Here on earth is a little different. My heart hurts. I can only liken it to that feeling when you get the breath knocked out of you, except it happens at just the thought of him.

People keep asking how we are doing. I am not sure how to respond. We get through the days. We seem happy. We are doing "normal" family things. I struggle with the blending in.

In loving memory of Weston

—*Julie Keeton*

# Thank You

Thank you... It's so hard to believe that it's been over eight years since I whispered those two words, over and over again, rocking you to your final sleep. At the time I didn't know why I chose these words to be the last you would hear, but they felt right in the moment. Now I know.

Thank you for your fight. I know it was hard and you struggled so. I saw past all the wires and tubes, into the depths of your soul. Your fiery spirit never gave up, and so I promise that mine never will.

Thank you for those seventeen days. Most were scarier than others, but I still treasure every short moment that I had with you to just stare into your eyes or sit beside you and hold your hand. Because of you, I will never take a single moment for granted.

Thank you for choosing me to be your mommy. Because of you, I am left a different woman than before, a better woman than before. Perhaps I am broken and scarred, but I am also hopeful. Because of you, I love deeper, laugh harder, and dream bigger.

Thank you my sweet girl, from the bottom of my heart, thank you.

In Loving Memory of Ella Marie Abramson  
(12.06.07 – 12.23.07)

—*Sabrina*

*Abramson*

# To The Person Who Thinks Grieving Parents Should Be Over It

Grieving is more than just sadness and tears. Once you lose a child, there are constant reminders that she is not here.

The medical bill that arrives six months after she passes away and the mail that continues to follow afterwards.

The family pictures that always miss just that one person unless you find a way to include her, even still, she is truly not there.

The common social question, "How many kids?" How to include her? How to explain? It can be a conversation stopper. But then, how to leave her out? I include her. I include her because she is my child.

People don't know what to say, what to tell you, when to invite you to things in fear of upsetting you. Please invite us. Let us decide.

People may even avoid us. Maybe we are not as easy to talk to as we once were, but please be patient as we are learning how to live this new life.

Holidays, anniversary dates, and birthdays come and go. Year after year, they don't stop.

Kids the age of our child go to school, lose their first tooth, graduate, get married, have children. The reminders keep on coming.

We look up when we hear someone say our child's name, our body reacts instinctually when we hear a baby cry. We may respond differently when you say you're having a child. Maybe we become more protective with our other children or even your child.

We may or may not do things in her memory. We may or may not visit her gravesite. We may or may not talk or write about her. Please don't tell me to change. Don't compare another loss with mine or tell me how someone else is doing by comparison.

Grief isn't just tears and sadness. I love so deeply and I want you to understand no, I am not over my child, nor will I ever be. My shattered heart may heal piece by piece, but triggers can take me back in a heartbeat. Grief truly is a part of daily life and not by choice. A song, smell, sound, name, hospital, street, or person can trigger vivid memories and emotions that you may never understand.

Hopefully you never understand.

In memory of Lily Grace

*Elzy*

—Amy

# My Heart

Before you were born, I kept you safe  
I kept you safe inside that place  
Our hearts were beating, like a rhythmic song  
I knew I loved you, all along

You had to fight  
Right from the start  
But time was not on our side  
It felt as though the doctors had lied

Six months of pure love, the purest I'd ever felt  
I didn't think I could handle  
The cards we'd been dealt  
When they said those words, nothing more we can do

I cried until there were no tears left  
My heart went with you that day  
Your fate wasn't fair  
Life wasn't the same but we were so lucky to have had you

Now every day I see signs from you  
From the cardinal bird to the butterflies blue  
You brought me a rainbow, she shines bright and true  
And she looks so much like you.

In loving memory of Ollie

—*Ashley Halligan*



# What Choice But Heartbreak?

Despite feeling complete as individuals and as a couple, my husband Russell and I couldn't help feeling something would make our life better: a baby. We had just turned 34, had achieved our major career goals and were financially secure. We had finished renovating our house into a perfect family home and for the first time in our lives, we were ready to give a child as much love as it deserved. I foolishly thought making this decision would mean I'd get pregnant instantly but conceiving didn't come easily for me and each month that passed led to disappointment.

After about 18 months of trying, Russell had an overwhelming feeling that we'd finally hit the jackpot. I was two days late and unusually exhausted.

When the positive sign appeared on the pregnancy test a smile exploded over his face. 'Really?' I clung to him in delighted shock. We'd done it. Our world was transformed instantly. This promise of new life gave us the permission to shrug off the debilitating cloak of mourning that we'd carried since Russell's father's death from cancer a few months before. Every Sunday, Russ would read a week-by-week baby book to me in bed preparing us for what was going to happen over the next seven days; he'd bring me grapefruit and chips at midnight when the thought of anything else turned my stomach; and we spent hours discussing names. 'You'll have to be the disciplinarian,' Russ warned me. 'I won't be able to keep a straight face or refuse anything Little Sweets wants.'

His pet name for me had always been Sweets and now there were two of us he needed to distinguish us. So he'd kiss my

tummy—Little Sweets—goodbye every morning before he went to work. At ten weeks, we went to the doctors for a check-up. Russ recorded our baby's rapid heart on his iPhone and emailed it to our parents. The messages came rushing back. My mum had cried on hearing it. My mother-in-law couldn't stop replaying it.

There is an enforced secrecy in pregnancy today, a rule that states you can't tell everyone until you've hit the 'safe' twelve week mark when the likelihood of miscarriage has dramatically reduced from 25% before six weeks to 0.6%. We celebrated hitting twelve weeks by telling the world and its mother. I happily told the waitress in my favorite restaurant why I could no longer enjoy their blue cheese salads and Russ' football team took him out for beers after their game to prematurely wet the baby's head. Everyone was so happy for us—especially those who had shared our infertility fears.

Being older parents—I would be 35 on the due date—we were warned to be cautious. I knew my age meant I had an increased risk of Down's and other genetic disorders but we decided to think positively, and to have a nuchal translucency test: an ultrasound and blood test at around twelve weeks, that would give an early indication of a baby's chances of having such things.

I knew something was up when the ultrasound technician left the room, returning immediately with my doctor and a nurse. 'The baby has increased fluid behind its neck,' our usually jolly doctor informed us flatly. 'Is that a good thing?' Russ was still willing the best but I remembered from his reading a few Sundays previously that this meant the very worst. Only if we were extremely blessed would the baby survive, the doctor said, but she implied the best thing that

could happen to me now was to miscarry naturally, for my own physical and mental health.

Pathetically, I swooned on the hospital bed and had to be fed juice while being cooled with a flannel. Russ swore under his breath and shook his head, while asking any medical person he could find what they thought—was this as serious as the doctor was making out, could she be wrong? He then drove home in silence while I sat weeping beside him, willing with every part of my being that we'd have good news—it had been a mistake!—at our appointment with a fetal specialist a week later.

I spent the next few days online reading such sad stories written by desperate pregnant women like me that I'd hyperventilate in agony. During this awful waiting game, I'd whisper to my belly, 'come on Little Sweets! Get better and prove the doctors wrong.'

During this no man's land time between the first ultrasound and our visit to the specialist, I have never felt so alone. Russ and I had non-stop discussions, of course, over whether we could keep a baby with Down's (we would) but even my lovely husband couldn't understand the physical aspect of my torment: my baby was part of me, living inside me. What had I done to make him ill?

I had one close friend who confessed she had been through the same terrible pain a few years ago, at her 12 week scan the baby's organs weren't functioning as they should, so I rang her to look for guidance. 'Please, please just promise me,' she cried, 'that if your baby is so ill it's going to die, that you let them take care of it. Don't leave it so late that you have to deliver it. That's what happened to me and it was the worst experience of my life. And it was my third pregnancy,

after having two healthy babies. Please don't let that be your first experience of childbirth. You may never recover.'

A few days later, we met with the specialist.

'Don't worry about dressing things up,' Russ said matter-of-factly. 'Just tell us doctor, what is going to happen?'

'There is zero chance this fetus will survive. It will die inside you at some point over the next few days or weeks. For your health and future fertility, I recommend a procedure to end the pregnancy immediately.'

'An abortion?' I cried.

'Don't think of it like that,' he replied. 'This is not an abortion. This pregnancy has no chance of going full term.' I think this kind man was helping me to understand that this baby would not survive, in a way it was already dead. 'The quicker you have it, the sooner you can recover and in a few months, you can start trying to conceive again.'

I have always been pro-choice, so the idea of an abortion was not morally unacceptable to me. But where were my choices now? I loved this creature inside me as much as I had ever loved anything; I loved how happy the thought of it made my husband. When my husband and I looked at our situation in black and white, we felt my choice to have an abortion was pro-life: pro my life (how could I function as a human being knowing my baby could die any moment inside me?) and pro the life of any babies I would be fortunate enough to carry in the future.

All that is left of my first sweet baby now is in the bottom drawer of my husband's bedside cabinet: the two positive pregnancy tests, the books he read from every Sunday

night, congratulations cards from friends, and one grainy ultrasound photo of our fragile child. We revisit the drawer occasionally, for our hopes and dreams are shut in there too. I'm not sure we'll ever get over such a loss but I know I will never feel ashamed of our decision. The thought that desperate mothers—for as soon as you conceive a much-wanted baby I feel a woman becomes a mother—could be judged when faced with such agony angers me beyond despair. We have every right to grieve. Women are afraid to speak out about such a loss for fear of judgment but they are not alone. I hope my story helps those whose hearts still sit heavily in their bellies where their babies should be, as mine still sits within me.

—*Sarah Ivens*

# The Butterfly

We took our grandchildren to Gatlinburg last summer, and while we were playing and eating lunch in the Smokies, a beautiful blue butterfly landed on our table. For quite a long time, no matter where the kids went, the butterfly stayed right with them. They were so excited. They just knew it was their Aunt Lori, my daughter, who had passed away and whom they missed so terribly much.

Lori loved nature.

The butterfly had been gone for an hour or so when my six year old granddaughter saw what she thought was the same blue butterfly approaching. She ran with her arms outstretched towards it, hollering, "LORI!"

When it came closer, she realized this butterfly was brown. "Oh I'm sorry," she said, "I thought you were someone else."

For Lori, forever in our hearts

—*Libby Probst*



