THE ALMOST MOTHERS OF THE GREATER LOUISVILLE METRO AREA

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

SPECIAL THANKS TO:
Louisville Metro Council and Fund for the Arts, University of Louisville’s Youth Violence Prevention Research Center, Tasha Golden, Hound Dog Press

Sarabande Writing Labs, Vol. 10
Spring 2018

Program director: Kristen Miller
Interior design: Danika Isdahl
Exterior design: Hound Dog Press

Sarabande Books is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, independent press based in Louisville, KY.
CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION  Kristen Miller  5
THE ALMOST MOTHERS OF THE GREATER LOUISVILLE METROPOLITAN AREA  Eli P.  7
MOTHER  Vanessa F.  9
I AM PAINTING THE WORLD WITH PEACE  Believe C.  10
NEW DAWN  Shelby S.  12
TO THE TREES WHO SACRIFICED THEMSELVES FOR THE WALKOUT  Dorothy A.  15
ASK LIKE A WASP  Aya A.  17
POST-CHASE  Mayukha B.  18
THE MORNING AFTER (OR 12:17PM)  Anna R.  19
BOTANY  Elena N.  21
BRUISES  London C.  23
MEMORIES  Aamya V.  24
AFRICAN QUEEN  Boneah M.  25
THE LAND OF WONDER  Tanasia F.  27
JUST IN A CLICK  Alanna D.  28
ANOTHER SCHOOL SHOOTING  Maggie S.  29
IMAGINE  Kylie Z.  31
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
Translaction
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.
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
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”
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 Fiancée 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
Aamya 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” 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. 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.