

# Writing that Binds

2018 Invitational Summer Institute  
Fellows' Anthology

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## The Sandrose

By Lisa Zachau

8 piles of dried wood

14 ironed table runners

6 sets of porcelain china

2 sets of silverware

A dining room table

Pictures of grandchildren

A sand rose

What is left in the house after the people have left? The process of cleaning out the remnants and memorabilia. We arrived in the days prior, one by one. My father first, then me and then my brother to the airport in the nearby city and then via state highway to the neighboring town. Fields of houses and thatched roof houses, and red apartment blocks blurring by as the car sped down the highway at speeds of 90 miles per hour, roses dotting the way.

An hour later, after seeing the seven towers in the distance and the steel gray blot of harbor, I sat up and looked out the window to see the familiar yet exotic sight of the ships in the harbor, tug boats, fishing schooners, commercial ferries, and an old yacht, kept in pristine condition for tourists to come see.

The harbor and inner city became suburbs and soon we were passing into the narrow streets with pristine small white houses flanked by rose bushes, cherry trees and meticulously kept gardens.

We pulled up to the house, this one also with a garden. Also with a neat square of grass in front of the house but the grass was dry, and completely brown in some places. Different from how I remembered it.

It had occurred suddenly- the fall. And despite her medical alert necklace and the urgent care that she received swiftly thereafter, she ended up in the hospital as she had many times before and was told after a few days that she was "medically unfit to care for herself". After much chaos, she had been taken by my aunt in a hurried frenzy three hours away and placed in an assisted-living facility. That was three months ago.

Now came the monumental task of clearing out the house. My aunt wanted nothing to do with it.

"Throw it all away!" she insisted in multiple "What's App" texts with disgusted emoji to emphasize her point. I couldn't blame her. She'd been hovering nervously waiting and

watching the situation for years- a stubborn 90 year old woman living in a two story house. Who, most definitely, would not be told what to do.

Inside the house everything smelled the same as always but also slightly mustier, staler, as if the windows hadn't been opened in months. The grandfather clock was standing beside the Beechwood, ticking as it always had. The green glass fishing buoys hanging by their netting as they always had. The large 1950s free standing glossy veneered radio stood in one corner as it always had as long as I could remember. Only my grandmother was gone.

I opened the glass cabinet and found the familiar knick-knacks each with a story attached: a miniature carriage, less than an inch long and pulled by eight tiny white horses, a souvenir taken from London for my grandmother and picked it up to move to the keep pile.

Then I focused on the sand rose- a crystalized gypsum composite resembling a rose, found in the desert that is created through swirling winds, pressure and time. She had told me often about it saying that my grandfather found it in the desert in Morocco when he was there on one of his trips as the captain of the commercial container ship he steered around the world. Legend has it that a sand rose has the magical property of being able to heal your heart. An exotic item with an exotic story- displaced from its home in the desert and taken to Northern Germany. Now my grandmother was moving three hours inland- also displaced from home and harbor city that she was comfortable to a place where she would also be exotic.

I moved the sand rose into the keep pile. Now it was mine. Soon it would make another trip over another ocean and be once again displaced.

Pull up a Chair  
By: Kaela Sweeney

The hot July before first grade provides a setting for my first memory at this table. I was eating a plain bagel with plain cream cheese, not toasted from Zim's bagel bakery. We drove to Zim's every morning that summer. Its close proximity to Westlake Drive along with the buzz of people surrounded by bright walls beckoned us even when Vo and Zeyde were on a diet. We talked on the way home and when the last cold drops of black coffee hit his lips, Zeyde threw the ceramic mug in the backseat to rest with the others from that month.

As we sat at the table enjoying our bagels that summer morning, Zeyde caught my eye and said, "Kaela, you're so lucky that you have a lifetime of cups of coffee ahead of you." This stuck with me like the condensation from the thick humidity on the windows looking over Westlake Drive.

The table heard him too.

Rectangular in shape, full of knots and turns and holes that you can stick a whole hand through; this table holds coffee and invites conversation.

A certain set of expectations sit in the four chairs surrounding the anchor. Only my grandfather, Zeyde, can sit at the seat with two cushions facing the window framed by plants. Even if you try to sit there, no matter who you are, his firm Brooklyn accent will make you move. Zeyde likes to watch the birds at his feeder while he eats. He made this table before I was born. It is simple and functional unlike the ornate masterpieces he creates now. Although this table has seen a lot of food and heard quite a few conversations, it's still treated as if it is on a pedestal in a museum. All of Zeyde's work garners that kind of respect. I used to dig my fingers into the porous, unfinished portions of the wood. It was satisfying for my young mind, like popping bubble wrap. If this table were in a college bar it would be etched with decades of initials. Traditions.

This table is strong and well-loved.

Although we have all benefited from this table sitting in Vo and Zeyde's kitchen, always ready no matter the time of day, it must have been created with the owner and artist in mind. Zeyde finds great satisfaction in enjoying a plate of food over stimulating conversation.

This table listens.

When I was younger, the four legs danced around my dreams and curiosities. It listened when I suddenly decided that I wanted to be a doctor and a poet on the side. The first career provided money and the second allowed me to spend a significant amount of time in Athens, on North Campus, under the trees. It caught the pieces of chocolate that fell from my Klondike bar when I

played Zeyde's famous game of, "describe your last bite well enough so that I can taste it." My ten-year-old mind scrambled to find the best combination of words to describe the crunchy, yet creamy consistency with the soft sweetness of the ice cream and the bitter sweetness of the chocolate. Zeyde would perceptively add that it's cold, and only gets creamy with the passage of time. This table heard stories of wizards and witches, chocolate frogs, and letters to Hogwarts. I had play dates, carved pumpkins, and cooled cookies here.

This table is a playground.

In high school, I told a lot of stories at this table. I talked about standing on one foot, so I wouldn't pass out before All-State band auditions, and then the rush of emotions when I found out that I made it. It was a springboard for college ideas and a place to laugh about crazy school assignments and the antics of a much younger sibling. It was also a place for Annie Hall, the dog my grandparents got my sophomore year of high school, to lick your hands. She's a mature dog, an academic like Vo and Zeyde. A few hours before I drove to Oxford, Ohio, this table listened as I grappled with the excitement of the unknown and the fear of living nine hours away from home.

This table is a shelf for the best stories.

In college, placemats were added, and I couldn't play with the holes and knicks anymore. This table became a place of interrogation. It didn't always pull me in like it used to. I had experienced more conversations and seemingly newer, more inviting tables. I reluctantly answered questions and counted down the minutes until I could leave. It became a bagel cooling station. While I was gone, Zim's closed, and Vo became the bagel baker. People from all over Athens came to sit at the table while learning her recipe. The table became a container for my frustration as I got help from Vo on Portuguese lessons and research papers for upper level courses in my quest to graduate at least a year early. This table caught my tears after Papa died. It became crowded; stools were added. It witnessed marriages, divorces, second marriages, and kids; people closed in to hear more.

This table is a stage.

A forest green tablecloth hid the beauty and secrets of the table at our post-wedding brunch. Two dog crates replaced the plants by the windows. Family and friends took pictures, ate, and said their final goodbyes. Some of my husband's friends sat around the table, bags under their eyes, talking about how their nights ended after our reception. None of them looked particularly familiar to me and I am not sure I could address any of them by name. They were guests at our table. They didn't even know what treasure hid under their empty plates. The table still listened. Conversation still happened, and an abundance of coffee eased headaches.

As I sit here, waiting for Vo and Zeyde to join me for breakfast, I know that I still have quite a few cups of coffee ahead of me.

This table invites fellowship. This table remembers.

The Porch Swing  
Tracy Wallace

An hourglass, a slow ticking grandfather clock, a pendulum, the old broken sundial, stability, resilient, tough, and durable. These are all words that could be used to describe my grandmother..... and her porch swing.

It seems like only yesterday when I got in the car after doing chores, a extremely difficult day in the 6th grade, and made my way to my Grandma's house. I stayed with her every night since my grandfather passed. She needed help and/or company, not really sure which one. We would usually talk about the day on the old porch swing. We liked to sit and just listen to the sounds of dusk, chirping, singing, buzzing, and much, much more. Thinking back, it was very similar to the lazy Sunday afternoon on Andy Griffith. After a while, we would start talking about the day and even discussing what was happening in the weeks to come. This would also include stories from her childhood. We always seemed to find a stopping point when nothing else needed to be said. My grandmother always had some type of advice to give about every topic under the sun. I spent every day of my middle and high school years with her and received a lot of advice and opinions on everything. She was harder on my than any other grandchild, only because she knew if I set my mind to it, I would do it. During summer vacations I didn't spend every night with her and soon began to miss those long nights of just swinging, sitting and listening. Maybe that is why I like being alone sometimes and really pondering all kinds of thoughts. The swing soon became my go-to place to just be.

Our days soon revolved around the swing time. I got very protective of our time in the swing with my grandmother and the actual swing. It wasn't any different from your average porch swing. It was just mine.

I really didn't like anyone, in particular- my cousins, sitting on that swing- especially with my grandma. I felt like they were stealing from me. That was our time and it only belonged to us. I would often try to scare the younger kids by swinging too high and telling them how dangerous it was.

I loved driving up to the old white farmhouse and seeing my grandmother sitting on the swing, swinging and waiting on me to discuss our day. The swing became a type of symbol to me. Something that I really didn't seem to understand at first. But as time elapsed on the old grandfather clock in the parlor, I could tell it would mean something to me one day. During those years when I needed a place to think, calm down, or just reflect, this is the place I would go.

That swing saw me in my younger teens- not really knowing who or what I was on into my high school and college years- finally deciding what I wanted to accomplish in life. Then I introduced my husband to the swing. We spent plenty of time on it, just swinging and listening. I introduced my children to the swing as soon as they were born. They seemed to love the idea of the swing. - just not in the same way as I did. They would rush to it every time we visited my grandma and just swing with her.



When my grandma passed, it seemed like the swing went with her. It seemed like I didn't have any time to just stop and think anymore. With two kids involved in everything and working full time, I didn't think about the swing for a while.

I've been married for 25 years now with two wonderful kids, but no porch swing. It finally came to me that I wasn't in the same place as my grandma was. I didn't have time for the porch swing then. This year is different- both kids have moved on to life and the thought of retirement looms over me, I wonder about a swing. My husband decided that we needed a swing this year. I think I finally figured out that the swing is a symbol of life. How it's time to slow down and reflect on the past and maybe just sit. I wonder what stories and advice I will give my grandkids and if it will be as special to them as that swing was to me.

Ol' Maud-The Old Rusty Truck

By Shannon Baxter

The miles, the rust, the memories: this truck has a voice, and she can speak volumes. What does she represent? What has she witnessed? What does she have to say?

Maud started out as a new/used truck that my dad loved. The hours that he spent washing, waxing, tinkering with the motor, and so on are beyond measure. He loved this truck and was so proud of her, but as time creates the wrinkles and aches on a person's body, so did time take a toll on Ol' Maud. For every rusted spot- there is a story, for every rip in the seat- there is a story, and for every dent in the metal- there is a story (that one big dent was not my fault – the horse had a mind of its own and careened into the side). Maud didn't mind. She would say that it gave her some character.

Maud faithfully carried us on so many adventures. However, the adventures made her thirsty, and it almost seemed as if we couldn't quench it. The running joke was you could never leave the engine running and pump her full of fuel at the same time because you would never get to leave the gas station. She was our pack mule stuffed to the brim with cans of diet Sundrop, beanie weenies, Hershey bars, marshmallows, moon pies, tents, and all of the odds and ends that there was scarcely any room for all of us. We were packed in like little sardines, but the Baxter/Holley clan was ready to go ride, camp, and spend time as a family. Ol' faithful Maud slowly pulled the old cattle trailer down the long, dusty road into Buffalo River Camp or crept carefully around the mountainous curves to Big South Fork. She was never in a rush. Dad would say, "There's no need to drive like maniacs; it will be there when we get there."

On one of our numerous expeditions to Big South Fork, she did get us there; however, this four hour drive felt like an eight hour marathon. As we slowly climbed the hills pulling the old cattle trailer, our minds drifted to the thoughts on how much fun could be packed into one trip. Would we climb the "goat trail"? Would we make it to the bridge and cross the wooden planks that tested our courage? Would we make it to the gun in the rock? The monumental task of setting up camp would have to come first. After unloading and arranging the numerous crates, we concurred that we had packed way too much food, candy, gadgets and gizmos, and that we could survive a month out in a remote wilderness.

After the sticky, gooey s'mores or creamy homemade ice cream were devoured and more childhood memories were shared, it was time for bed. Even though the fanciest item in our tent was an air mattress, we were living the life of a king. As we laid there all exhausted from the day's activities, the wind slowly increased momentum like a train moving down the track. The rain steadily peppered the tent creating small ponds that swallowed and hungrily devoured some of the items not returned to the proper place. The increasing wind howled and shook the tent as if it was a scarlet cape taunted by a matador in front of an angry bull. "Will it hold?" "Will we be okay?" "Are the stakes deep enough in the ground and the ropes strong enough to anchor us to the ground?" While the beast roared around on, the fears crept within the group. Faintly, a chuckle started to emerge from the layers of blankets. "Oh man, I think I feel that it's about to go!" "She is not going to last much longer!" My dad, who was trying to frighten all of the naïve grandchildren, exclaimed this over and over.

Maud, with her vacant eyes, watched over over us as the storm moved on to terrify another part of the secluded mountain. She was like the gate guard adding protection as sleep invaded our bodies. As the sun started peeking through the small slits in the top of the tent, the need to investigate if any destruction had occurred. To all of our surprise, just a few items had toppled over from the fierce wind. The cords that secured the tent held as strong as the love that encompasses this family.

The weekend blurred past us even though we begged for Father Time to slow down the minutes on the clock. I cherished the wonderful moments with my family but greedily wanted more. More time to sit on the back of my steed and whisper my dreams and secrets to him. He would silently agree with me as he nodded his head to the rhythm of his feet. Plop, plop, plop...we rode on, down to the river's edge where the white caps of the icy water created a foam that collected on his muzzle like a cappuccino. We laughed at the silliness, the innocence, and the freedom. Freedom from judging eyes searching for the "perfect" person who was expected to have all of the answers; freedom to just be FREE. I drank the fresh air and expelled out all of the toxins that had invaded my body over the last few months. I let go of the pain, hurt, anger, and poison so I could be free.

The embers of the dying fire created a somber atmosphere. The last night...the last night of stillness...the last night of not a care in the world. While the dew fell upon us, the ghostly smoke floated about like a thief into the night, sneaking into the open vents of our tent infusing the cedar/oaky cologne with the patched quilts that were sewn with love. The song of crickets, frogs, and the last crackle of the fire created a melody of peace. Yes...peace. Nodding off replaced the quiet chatter of the group. A deep breath followed by a slight sigh expressed our yearning for more, but it was time for bed. The older, wrinkled hands of my dad clap together and he proclaimed, "This is not the last *hoorah*, but just the beginning." "Goodnight y'all."

Maud coughed and cleared her throat expelling light puffs of smokes from her lungs, ready to return home. She groaned as she retraced her steps back to home-back to where the journey all began. Back to the real world. Back to work and the hustle and bustle of the day to day tasks.

Maud completed her task. Everyone is home-safe and sound. Now, it's her time to relax. She takes her place under the Bradford pear trees, enjoying the sweet smell as the blooms create a blanket over her body. She smiles as she closes her eyes dreaming of the next adventure.

**How Was My Day?**  
**By Katie Marshall**

He came in with "KILL ME" scrawled across his wrist,  
his black eye calling out for help  
as loudly as his crossed arms and eye rolls  
did before they melted into tears.

The buzz of a *Times* alert made slaves of thoughts  
its headlines pummeled our reserves.  
Images of huddled bodies floating  
left a residue of shaking and fears.

But,

Then she carried her pride into my classroom,  
and laid it on the floor to die.  
"I'm so sorry for yesterday."  
Taking me completely by surprise.

A passing grade put down roots and grew again  
in a place that had been barren.  
And next to it grew the confidence  
Failure had been trying to choke with lies.

So, how was my day?  
Impossible to summarize.

## Nostalgic

By Rachel Dudak

Do you remember?

You used to play in the mud. You loved the cold, oozy feeling as the mud seeped between your fingers and toes. Your handiwork boasted of grand castles, deep rivers, and bumpy roads. Now, you avoid mucky puddles after a rainstorm. You mostly stay on the trails when you're hiking. You pull out your sanitizer at restaurants, and you frantically snap at your kids, "Don't put that in your mouth!"

You danced like no one was watching. You didn't even care if you had the beat right. Your wild flock of frizzy curls moved along freely with your body. Your moves were not elegant but were beyond a doubt: amusing. You danced to old records your mom played, and to one of your favorites: *Thriller*. And, yes, even to *New Kids on the Block*. These days, when you hear those familiar numbers in your car, you may get the urge, but there's not nearly as much freedom to move about as you feel the tight constraint of the safety belt.

You made blanket forts. Your own secret hideaway. A steady fortress designed with old quilts draped over tables and chairs that you were sure no one would tear down. You enjoyed the silence and solitude the soft walls offered. Today, there's nowhere to hide. Even the pantry you desperately and quietly slip away to has clearly been visited recently as the sad, empty Oreos package stares back at you.

You used to skate down steep hills. You weren't afraid. Rollerblading set you free and you loved the refreshing breeze rushing through your body as you plunged faster and faster. You even attempted the ramp with your skateboard a time or two for an added thrill. Now, you cautiously roll. You glide along slowly on four wheels every five years or so at the flat skating rink, just hoping and praying you don't fall on your tailbone.

You used to eat Kool-Aid powder. That's right. Ate it with your soggy finger straight from the pack. There was no particular flavor other than pure sugar, but you got a kick out of how it turned your mouth bright blue, and delighted in the feeling as it melted over your tongue. These days, before buying packaged foods, you feverishly read over the listed ingredients. You may even have to Google that word you can't pronounce so you're sure you're not poisoning your kids with...heaven forbid...sugar!

You used to stay up late on Saturday nights. Waiting, to make certain your parents were fast asleep so you could tip-toe down the stairs. No way would you be able to show up at school on

Monday without being able to have an in-depth discussion about the latest Spartan Cheerleader skit on *Saturday Night Live*. Now, you are ecstatic when you actually get to climb in bed by 9:00. You eagerly begin an episode of *The Office*, only to succumb to heavy eyelids and drift off ten minutes in.

Wasn't that just a few years ago? I remember fixing my eyes on the hands of the clock, trying to make them speed up. Now, time is more like a ball rapidly rolling down a hill. I can't keep up with it as it gains momentum. I will never own my own time, but I can make the most of it. Bring on the mud, music, blankets, and Kool-Aid. This time around I might just take you up on it.

By Lauren Greathouse

I haven't always loved my hair. As a child, I longed for a long, thick mane, envying my classmates who donned shiny, high ponies topped with a bright pink bow, while my thin, mousy hair tangled with the slightest movement.

The hair lust continued through high school. In true Janet Jackson style, I permed my hair, tight curls clinging to the top of my head with lavender-scented gel slicked above my ears forming a road to nowhere. No amount of primping or teasing, spraying or picking could result in the desired effect.

Even as an adult, I despised fooling with my hair. Always thin, never shiny, I'd painfully schedule an overdue appointment at a random salon and succumb to whatever eager suggestion the stylist had. One time I was convinced that a pixie cut would be perfect. Strutting in the salon, picture of a stunning pixie-clad actress in hand, I presented my request to the stylist. Picking her fingers through my lacking locks, she cupped her hands around my ears and mouthed in an I'm- better- than- you, soul- crushing response, "um, no- Dumbo." Pencil that onto my mile-long list of insecurities.

Eventually my hair took a back seat to walking down the aisle, birthing classes, delivery rooms, moving vans, home renovation projects, and first days of school. Our family celebrated and loved, but also endured. Not so long ago, hurt prevailed, and all that our family had worked towards crumbled around us. Downtrodden, tail between our legs, we found ourselves wrestling with change. The unexpected, kicking and screaming kind of change. Changing our church. Changing our community. Changing our jobs, our schools, and our lifestyle. Finally going to a salon regularly for a cut and color, and not sure about our financial security, I begrudgingly canceled an upcoming appointment. I decided it was time to go "au natural". Not by choice, my hair became my platform, the "I don't give a damn" do—an outward display of the raging storm inside me.

Almost immediately the signs of neglect appeared, forming a skunk-like stripe in the part, and slowly, over the weeks, cascading down towards my temple. I avoided old friends, fearful for the pity stares that come with my unkempt look. But then, something astonishing happened. A crown appeared, highlighted in the sunlight, radiant sparkles spreading. Each strand of hair seemed to take on a color of its own- silver and charcoal, snow white and gold like a cacophony of color woven together into something unique, something, interesting, something a little messy, but something beautiful. Like my hair, over time, the hurt and pain, anger and blame melded into the joys and satisfaction and my life became something authentic.

Today, I notice that people will stare at my hair. I imagine them wondering whether I spend hundreds of dollars to achieve my vogue-like color, or perhaps questioning why in the world I would choose to be gray. I don't mind. I see my silver as a victory; a sign of triumph, a sign of hope and grace that only comes from suffering and storms, and I know that I have, and will always, survive them.

Dear Husband By Laura Lynn Roland

Dear Husband,

"Well, duh dumbass." There really is no other response when you ask me if I have given up on my diet as I am eating the McDonald's French Fries. For a man who is smarter

than Einstein, sometimes you say not-right, are-you-kidding-me things. So for future reference, here is my how-to in what not to say.

Don't tell me not to worry. Seriously? I am pretty sure that in the female genome God hard-wired levels of worry. I worry about being back to lunch on time, turning off the flat-iron – did I? I worry about you and your hurts and paying for the medical bills I told you not to worry about. You say, don't worry, but how can I not? So even though those Kryptonite fries will add two inches to these thighs – I discard the worry to savor in the salty fattiness, while only for a nanosecond, I experience a reprieve from the worry.

But then I start to worry again. Worry about doing a good job, being a good mom, being a good wife, being a good teacher, being good...enough. The worry, while not debilitating, is a fundamental truth about myself. The load I balance, usually, most of the time, is not so unbalanced that I don't manage well. But then the load tips – like today – where the carefully balanced tray that is Laura Lynn's life gets too heavy.

Perhaps that's why I don't sleep. Perhaps that's why I can't say no to carbs, red wine, and Godiva. Perhaps that's why I have melted-together, melted-down moments.

So, love of my life, here is my how-to in what to say when my life is a tilt-a-whirl, when I succumb to the siren call of food that breaks the diet, just when it's been a long day:

- Honey, I made dinner for you AND I cleaned the kitchen.
- Sweetie, I got a load of laundry started.
- Darling, don't worry, the cats' box is clean and I fed them too.
- Pumpkin – I called the electric, water and cable companies and took care of everything!
- Poochie – the groceries have been bought and put away.
- Honey Buns – I've run a hot bath and have Netflix ready.

Notice, husband mine, that I didn't tell you to tell me I am beautiful or "I love you" because you tell; you show me that multiple times every day. Keep saying that – but leave the fries out of the conversation.

Always and forever,

Your Wife

Laura Lynn Roland

**Loafing**  
Amanda LaForte

Rolling down backroads,  
Sitting on the passenger side,



Bumping along in that ole, '66, blue Chevy,  
Watching Paw-Paw drive.  
Looking out over the fields of corn or cotton,  
The pastures of goldenrod.  
Wondering about his younger years,  
Who was his trusted guide?

Did your paw-paw take you loafing?  
Did you know where you were going,  
Or just along for the ride?  
Let the time spent together heal the hurt inside.

Some memories keep me going.  
Bouncing on that worn, cracked seat,  
Bluegrass a blaring to the sound of tapping feet.  
Wondering where we might go-  
Trowbridge's for ice cream,  
or down to the creek.

Did your paw-paw take you loafing?  
Did you know where you were going,  
Or just along for the ride?  
Let the time spent together heal the hurt inside.

Life was simple, now that I look back.  
Stopping at JT's for the perfect snack.  
Creeping across Ghost Bridge,  
Hoping we don't fall,  
Forks of Cypress columns high above it all.

Did your paw-paw take you loafing?  
Did you know where you were going,  
Or just along for the ride?  
Let the time spent together heal the hurt inside.

Driving down backroads,  
my girls on the passenger side.  
Describe that ole, blue truck  
while they watch me drive.  
Look out over the fields of corn or cotton,  
the pastures of goldenrod.  
Wonder about the next few years,  
Will I be a worthy guide?

Do you take your children loafing?  
Do they know where you're going?  
Are they just along for the ride?  
Spending time together,  
Hoping they share the hurt inside.

## **A Morning Walk**

**Nicole Bonner**

Buzz..... Buzz..... “It is four thirty a.m.”  
Buzz....Buzz..... “It is four thirty a.m.,” screamed my alarm. Jumping out of bed to throw on some clothes. Sliding the bacon in the oven and stirring in the oatmeal, I remember to make lunches quickly before I head out. As the sweet, hickory scent diffuses through the air, I yell, “Wake up! Wake up! Everyone needs to be up and ready by the time I get back.” “Maliek, please make sure you wake your sister so she can get ready.” “Yes momma,” he sleepily murmurs as I fly out the door.

Relishing in the moment of solitude, my mind begins to process while sliding my headphones in.

Ready. Set. Go!

Let me get in the groove and get around this corner. Aches riddling each muscle and stumping the nerves, I trot on. Many thoughts begin to race. Look at her! Here she comes moving in and out like a race car in the Indy 500. I need to catch up with her. She is moving so briskly that I do not stand a chance. I feel like I have the weight of the world dragging behind me. How can I get Sydney into more activities? She really needs a tutor too. Will I have time to go to my meeting today? What about completing my student loan paperwork? I wish he would find a job close to home; doesn't he realize gas is expensive? Momma needs a new wheelchair; how will we ever afford that? Not on this salary! I need to go back to school—but that will be

too much time away from Sydney. I already did that with him. Sucking in the air.... Take a deep breathe Nicole!

Beep. Beep. He moves up behind me covered with sweat drenching solely the right side of his body, but glistening in the sunlight as it sails down his brow while he bounces to the beat of his own tuba! He's on a mission. I wonder what he needs to get accomplished. What are some tasks that I need to tackle off my laundry list? Prep dinner. Complete and submit my lesson plans. Email the teachers on my team in order to make sure they are good for the day. Call the doctor. Follow up with Sydney's teacher. Find out the process for ordering daddy's tombstone. I need to see my therapist!

Here comes another neighbor; his good morning prompts me to stay in my own lane. His eyes focus on the ground two steps in front of him as he pushes his exhaust blowing like the smoke and lava of a volcano. While picking up the pace, I reflect on the fact that I was that volcano yesterday. Why can't people communicate what they need or want without overloading me with so many questions: "How are you going to take care of this?" "Why can't you do that?" "So what are you doing today?" "Why can't you stay at home?" "Can I come with you?"...

Dear Momma

I know that you hate staying at home, but you cannot go to work with me. I wish you enjoyed going to the center

every day and had a consistent ride to get there. Just to get out of the house would be great. Whether you went to the Y for water aerobics or fellowship at the church. I don't know what to do; I know you need a constant companion, but daddy is not here. I miss him too! Why did he have to go? I assure you I wasn't ready either. Is anyone? And there are so many other items I need to focus on. I just don't have enough time for everything nor do I have answers.

With love... Confused with a Side of Ain't Nobody Got Time for That.

Gasping for air, the melodic flow of Donnie whispers, "Well you just stand when there's nothing left to do. You just stand, watch the Lord see you through. Yes, after you done all you can, you just stand."

Oh who is that? She must be new to the track. She is a doe galloping through the dense thicket; yet she sticks to the outer edge of the trail. My mind shifts. The soft things. The surprises; she picked flowers at recess to brighten my day or him cooking breakfast. They are the gifts that continue giving daily as they are undergoing the metamorphic stages of life. "He saw the best in me.... When everyone else around me could only see the worst in me" chimes in right on time. Pushing along the pathway, some partners simultaneously node while passing me by. They're in tune with each other like various beats to a song coming together to create a majestic melody. A partner would be a gift from heaven. The perfect gift with his own personal flaws that compliment mine. We can share. Hopes and dreams. Successes and failures.

Notices and concerns. My life and his life. The gift of family and support follow the same path.

Thank you. Thirty minutes. One point four five minutes.

Calmly panting...Until next time.