

Words Make Visible the Unseen by Putsata Reang

An introduction to Write Around Portland's 52nd anthology, *Illuminated by the Words / Iluminados por las palabras*, Spring 2017

Putsata Reang is an author and international journalist who has worked in more than a dozen countries around the world. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times* and *Mother Jones*, and she has been a reporter for major newspapers including *The Seattle Times*, and the *San Jose Mercury News*. In 2016, following her residency at Hedgebrook, she was honored with an award that recognizes women writing for social change.



I knew I had a problem when the words and images would not leave my head. I knew, when the poem was read out loud, it would leech into my blood and bones; it would beat within me like a song or a scar that is always faintly there. I did not know that four years later, the beat of that poem, of those words, would only grow louder and remind me that great writing is like this. Great writing hooks into cobwebbed corners of our conscience, and does not let go.

The poem that still resonates with me crossed my path in the spring of 2013 when I volunteered as a reader for one of Write Around Portland's upcoming anthologies. Over the course of a few weeks, I sat around a table with several other volunteer readers. We read a dozen poems and short prose, maybe more, scribbling comments on a form before discussing our top picks. Each piece of writing touched me in their own ways, for their sparse and urgent language, for their vivid details, for their absolute fidelity to the truth. But one in particular stopped me in my tracks, and followed me home.

The poem is by Myriah Kirchoff, published in Write Around Portland's 15th volume anthology, *Hear Each Drop / Escuchar cada gota*. And the image that seared in me was the stunning and crushing moment in the poem when the subject of the piece, a traveler at a bus station, drops his duffel bag. The traveler's few possessions, contained within the bag, are suddenly strewn across the street for strangers to see: a ChapStick that rolls away, wool socks, a map of Mexico, a leather belt. The vulnerability of the poem shook me. And the invisibility of the man and his world suddenly scattered around him is the ghost that has haunted me since.

The line that separates most of us from the traveler in the poem is see-through thin. We are more alike than we readily admit. Yet every day, there are so many among us who move about the world unseen, unacknowledged, and disregarded.

After reading that poem, I have made greater efforts in acknowledging strangers on the street. I have been more mindful of people in my community who have less than me, whose lives are more precarious than mine, whose worlds are confined to a single bag. I have been challenged by a single poem to open my eyes—and my heart—a little wider.

That is the enduring genius of Write Around Portland. It is a place that fosters creativity and harnesses untapped talent. It is a place that encourages everyone who has something to say to write it down and give it shape. It is a place where the invisible is made visible, where poetry like the one written by Myriah has the power to change and to connect us not only with each other but to our own humanity.

Within these pages, you will find writings from both youth and adults grappling with mental health and developmental disability challenges, youth experiencing homelessness, adults living in low-income housing, and young men incarcerated in prison. I hope you enjoy these latest works by Write Around Portland participants, and that you will open your eyes and your heart a little wider, too.

But, I'm Not A Writer by Linda Apperson

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Linda Apperson is a retired stage manager and recent transplant to Portland. She volunteers at Write Around as a facilitator, scribe, copy editor, and office helper. She also volunteers at Outside In as a mock job interviewer and as a mentor to drama students at Cleveland High School. In her previous life, she stage managed over 300 productions of musicals, operas and dramas and was a lecturer in the Stanford University Department of Theatre and Performance Studies. She is the author of *Stage Managing and Theatre Etiquette*.



But I'm not a writer was my steadfast response when anyone suggested I train to be a facilitator at Write Around. Intrigued by the idea of holding writing workshops for people who were not often given a creative voice, I wanted to help, but only from the periphery. I wasn't a writer, after all. So, I assisted with mailings and office tasks. And then I joined a selection committee for the upcoming anthology. I was engrossed by the power of the pieces we read and found choosing the submissions for publication a nearly impossible, but deeply gratifying task.

At the book release reading I was moved to witness the writers expressing themselves through their written words. (Seriously, do not go to an anthology release party without tissues.) I was in awe of their ability to put heart and soul on paper. But I could not begin to do what these writers were doing. In spite of having published a non-fiction book, I could not, would not, see myself as a writer. I was not in their league.

Back in the dark ages of my school days, I had a teacher who ridiculed a story I wrote for her class. The assignment was to create a fictional character and she used mine as an example of what not to do. She was tough, Miss Lund. She taught me everything I needed to know about creating an outline, composing a strong thesis statement, writing a persuasive argument, and tackling essay questions on tests, so naturally, I assumed she was the ultimate judge of all things written. But Write Around proved Miss Lund wrong. Respect. Encouragement. Positive feedback. *That* is what enables people to pick up their pens and pencils and put words to paper, even those who *felt* as stubbornly as I did, "I am not a writer." And that is what gives them the confidence to share those words, to keep writing, to let themselves go deeper into their feelings, play with a new idea, or try to tell a story from a different point of view and in the process, perhaps, learn something about themselves.

At a reading at Coffee Creek, after sharing her piece, a writer exclaimed, *I've never told that to anyone before*. The other women cheered her honesty and courage. In another group, an elderly woman said, *I never thought anyone would want to hear my stories*. I later learned her children treasured the journal she shared with them and celebrated her publication in an anthology. Over and over I hear participants express how writing changed their lives in ways small and large.

I am honored and humbled to be writing an introduction to this anthology. Write Around has worked their magic with me, as it seems they do with all who join this community. I have learned that we are *all* writers. We have stories to write and share and we need to hear each others' stories. Let these stories teach us and move us, entertain us and shake us from our complacency and old beliefs. Enjoy the ride!