

Lucky by Lara Bjork

An introduction to Write Around Portland's 51st anthology,
Light to the Edge, Fall 2016

As a long-time fan of Write Around Portland and more recent facilitator, Lara Bjork has been fortunate to write with people at the MacDonald Center in Old Town, Street Roots vendors, and people whose lives have been affected by organ donation. She continues to be honored by the trust that Write Around puts in their facilitators to create a welcoming table (and, in her case, their faith that she will leave some of the M&M's for everyone else). She has spent years writing grant proposals for social and environmental causes, lately to support the Xerces Society for Invertebrate Conservation and its work to protect bees, butterflies, dragonflies, and other small creatures. Given the choice, she'd spend more time writing short fiction and telling you about why Write Around Portland is unlike any other nonprofit she's ever known.



Here's what I know about how this book came to be. Starting in September, twenty small groups gathered all around the Portland metro area, with open journals and a willingness to show up at least once and see what it was all about. Each week, the groups came together again, to write quickly, without worrying about doing it wrong. Each person read their work out loud to people who had been strangers to them but became familiar and known in the course of ten weeks. Then each person picked three of their favorite pieces, copied them out by hand, and turned them over, to be typed up and read by other small groups of people, who mostly enjoyed the chance, except when they were sad that they could only pick *one* piece by each author.

If you're lucky, you came to a book launch parties and heard the authors step up to the mic, sometimes swallowing their hesitation, sometimes owning the room from the moment they walked in, sometimes relying on a friend to read for them. You might have heard the crowd call out gentle encouragement for the writer who needed extra time to summon their voice. If you're like me, you teared up more than once, only to have the next writer make you laugh deeply.

If you're among the luckiest, as I have been, you were in the room when the words first unspooled from pens as the clock counted down. You got to listen when these newly born phrases were said aloud for the very first time. Even the writer might have been surprised to find out what ended up on the page.

Like everyone else in the room who heard these freshly written words, you offered something back. Maybe a nod, a gasp, a giggle, a long sigh before saying "I really liked that part about what it feels like to lose your wedding ring only to have a stranger return it to you". Or maybe, as soon as the last period rang out, an exclamation bubbled over: "That's it exactly! Those are the perfect words to describe a man who doesn't know how to talk to his son but wants to tell him he's amazing". Or maybe the words touched on the most tender of memories, and you had to give yourself a minute, knowing that the writer had written the truth.

If I was there with you, I saw you. The dignity that carries you through the worst of life, even when it feels like the world won't let you be proud of yourself. The warmth that you feel for everyone you consider to be your family. The humor you find in the everyday. The unrestrained imagination that created a whole world in the space of seven minutes. I heard the humanity in your words, and I thank you for strengthening the connections that keep all of us together.

Let's all count ourselves as lucky to have the chance to hold these words in our hands and our hearts—the nostalgic, conflicted, joyful, sad, piercing, funny, and unexpected words that these glorious writers have released from their pens. Thank you, writers, and thank you, Write Around Portland.

Lost and Found by Jen Violi

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Jen Violi is the author of *Putting Makeup on Dead People*, a BCCB Blue Ribbon Book, and finalist for the Oregon Book Awards. Jen is a columnist for *Sweatpants & Coffee*, and her work has been featured in *The Baltimore Review*, *Burlesque Press*, *Annapurna Living* and the collection *Monday Nights* (UNO Press 2016). As a mentor, editor, and facilitator, Jen creates sanctuary for stories and the people who need to tell them.



When I moved to Portland in 2009, I was a bit of a wreck. On the way to Portland, my marriage ended. Once I got here, I lost my job. With the exception of someone from my theatre community in college about fourteen years before, I didn't know a soul. I felt lost, unmoored, a stranger in the strange land of myself, not to mention a new city.

Through it all—tears and insomnia, fears and panic attacks—I wrote. I revised my novel slated for publication. I wrote a new novel. I wrote emails and letters and journaled in the middle of the night. I wasn't sure of much, but I knew how to put a word on a page, and a word after that. In each one, I realized with relief: Oh, there I am! I discovered the me I thought I'd lost. Slowly I connected with people, as well as phrases and sentences. My friends from Ohio and Maryland and Louisiana said, "Oh you should meet..." and I did. One of the first new friends I met that way learned I was a writer, and a lonely one at that, and told me about Write Around Portland. "You could volunteer with them," she said.

I followed her suggestion to Write Around Portland's office, where I found some marvelous other word nerds and helped with mailings and events. Eventually I applied and was accepted to do the facilitator training, and thrilled to lead workshops at The Multnomah Senior Center and at Hotlips. Before I knew it, through Write Around Portland, I found a creative community, a way to nurture my love of writing and facilitating, an organization that believed as deeply in the transformative power of stories as I did. I'd found a place.

Simultaneously, I decided to rebuild my life on a foundation I loved, trusted, and knew: words. I started my own business, doing developmental editing of manuscripts, mentoring writers, facilitating retreats and workshops. Again, words helped me find a place for myself.

On the following pages, you'll get to read the words of other writers who have found a place, a voice, a self, an insight, through writing in a workshop with Write Around Portland, and ultimately, through words.

We humans can get so easily lost—from ourselves or who we want to be, from home as we knew it, from each other. Although I know of other routes, some slippery and shrouded, writing remains my most reliable, well-lit road to finding myself anew. Seven years after arriving in Portland, here I am, doing the same work, and continuing to find my way as a writer and a human being. Still, whenever I get lost, I lay out words like planks of wood, one at a time, and finally, in some unassuming moment, realize they've made a bridge for me to cross the loneliness and uncertainty and find myself on the other side.

As you savor the offerings from writers in this anthology, I invite you to consider each word, one after the other, as one human's small but mighty declaration of "Here I am." And here I am. And here, too, I am. A bridge from lost to found.