

# Oregon Humanities

A JOURNAL OF IDEAS AND PERSPECTIVES

Summer 2008

## Moving Beyond Words

OCH board member Ben Moorad explores writing as a transformative act.

During a monthlong residency earlier this year at the MacDowell Colony in New Hampshire, poet and OCH board member Ben Moorad strung rows and rows of typed pages from his book in progress across his studio. A proponent of slowing down the writing process and using writing as a transformative act, Moorad surrounded himself with this collage of words as he pored over records of his grandfather's neuropsychiatric work in the 1930s and '40s and delved into the themes of suicide and the "slipperiness" of scrutinizing the lives of others for his current project, *The Envelope of Suicides*. The book, Moorad's first piece of extended prose, is a nonfiction account of both his grandfather's study of the effects of suicide on a small Connecticut town and Moorad's relationship with his grandfather. Moorad's belief in the transformative power of writ-

ing is evident not only in his current project, but also in his past endeavors. In 1999, he cofounded Write Around Portland, a nonprofit that hosts writing workshops for a diverse population—from veterans and homeless youths to people affected by mental illness, domestic violence, HIV/AIDS, and drug and alcohol addiction—with the purpose of helping individuals change their lives and build community. As Write Around Portland grew and evolved, Moorad noticed a change in his own work and in his writing process. "My writing became a lot less academic," he says. "I took it a lot more seriously, because it felt like it would be disrespectful not to." Moorad left Write Around Portland in 2002 but continues to serve on its board of directors.

The transformative power of writing has informed Moorad's work in other ways. Last fall at Ogle Gallery in Portland, he collaborated with visual artist Rachel Wrecking in "The Hidden Black of Milk." The exhibit began as an experiment that began when Moorad wondered, "What if people came to what could be a very intimidating poetic form, but came to it with the expectation of a gallery goer?" For the exhibit, Wrecking created eighty-one handmade books filled with nine terza rima poems by Moorad. Seeing Wrecking's interpretation of his poetry, Moorad says, "was like a very strangely warped mirror

held up to the work." Moorad considered the experiment a success, saying, "A lot of people who didn't see themselves as poetry lovers understood exactly what I was saying in the poems."

In August, Moorad will begin work as the interim director of the Returning Veterans Resource Project NW, a nonprofit that offers free mental-health counseling to veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their families. He will be fundraising and coordinating volunteer therapists, as well as looking ahead to long-term goals, with a focus on ensuring the sustainability of the organization. Moorad arrived at the decision to work at Returning Veterans after asking himself, "What is my response to the war?"

In all of his endeavors, Moorad seems inspired by Write Around Portland workshop participants: "The power of expression isn't an abstract concept [to them]," he says. "It's a way of making sense of their lives and changing their lives."

—Alix Volkmann

Thomas Cobb



OCH board member Ben Moorad