

**Three Lines, Ten Years:  
An introduction to *The Cracks in the  
Paint, Write Around Portland's  
30<sup>th</sup> Anthology***

**By Robyn Steely, Executive Director**



*Robyn Steely (behind the podium) at the spring 2009 Write Around Portland community reading, applauding the spring volunteer workshop facilitators.*

Above my desk, pinned to my bulletin board, three haiku poems are fading in the sun. I keep them there to anchor me as I work, a reminder of how profoundly transformational it can be to write in community. These simple, short lines cut right to the core of how deeply Write Around Portland has affected my life.

La’Velle, a participant in a workshop at the county jail, wrote the haiku in 2002 (I hope you will read them in our anniversary retrospective on page 33 and at the end of this introduction). I remember clearly the night he wrote them. That summer, I was in my second year volunteering to facilitate workshops for Write Around Portland. La’Velle and I were sitting together with 11 others around heavy gray corrections-grade tables in brown plastic chairs. We were locked in a white cinderblock walled room with no windows to write and share for two hours. We were trying something new that evening—centuries-old, 3 line, fixed syllable Japanese poems.

I’d always loved the simplicity of haiku, but the workshop in the jail helped me appreciate the form on a new level, in a more personal way. During our ten weeks writing together, a few men in the group had been sent to the “hole” (solitary confinement). When they were released from the hole, they told me that they weren’t allowed to have any personal items in there, including their Write Around Portland journals or pencils. The hole was, of course, punitive. In jail, as well as in poverty and isolation, writing is much more than a pastime. It is vital.

The participants’ experience reminded me of Audre Lorde’s book *Sister Outsider* and her passage about poetry. “Of all the art forms,” Lorde wrote, “poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts, in the hospital pantry, on the subway, and on scraps of surplus paper.” Or, I thought, on a bus ticket, a matchbook cover, on one’s own arm. Very short poetry could even be “written” in one’s mind, without any paper at all. It could be created on the street, while waiting in line for services, at the doctor’s office—or in the hole. For me, this resonates with the workshop in the jail and with Write Around Portland’s commitment to making writing accessible for people living on the lowest of incomes and experiencing isolation.

The participants looked at me skeptically when I suggested we try to write haiku together, but I asked them to give it a shot. There is nothing natural, nothing green or seasonal in jail – the inspiration for

traditional haiku. Just grayness, hard surfaces, rooms and hallways that all look the same. But I wanted to give them another writing tool, another style to try. More than that, I wanted to share with them the *power* of writing, the *freedom* in writing, writing's ability to connect us to ourselves and to each other and a way to express themselves outside of their incarceration, out of their isolation.

The men wrote their poems, counting syllables to themselves in a whisper, on their fingers or with nods of their chins. They wrote beautiful, powerful haiku they shared with each other. La'Velle wrote:

*I'm confused and dazed  
Dark room with no opening.  
Light. My God. My door.*

Normally this group was ready to offer positive feedback, but we all sat in silence, listening to these carefully chosen words, in awe of what was conveyed in so few lines. We felt ourselves connecting that night in a way we hadn't in previous weeks, in a way that participants of all Write Around Portland workshops connect with one another—as people who may not have otherwise met but who are now together in community through their shared experience as writers. It sounds so simple, but honestly, I have rarely felt such a gift of *presence*—being present for one another—elsewhere in my life.

Two years after that workshop, I was still facilitating workshops in the jail when La'Velle sent a handwritten letter of thanks to Write Around Portland. He ended his note, *"I thought I would touch base with the place in this world that has left something in this world with my name on it, other than a jail record."*

In this 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary year, I reflect on La'Velle's words about what this program has meant to him and back on my own experience in Write Around Portland. I reflect back with much gratitude to:

- Liza Halley and Ben Moorad for creating this amazing organization. Their extraordinary idea and leadership have inspired so many people not only to write but to think of themselves as writers, and most importantly, to use writing to build authentic, respectful community. Their continued confidence, guidance and support are invaluable.
- The 200 volunteer workshop facilitators, 700 other volunteers, interns and board members and more than 1,600 donors who have given their time, energy and financial support to build and sustain this program.
- The social service agencies and organizations—over 150 to date—with whom we have collaborated to hold workshops throughout the greater Portland area and southwest Washington.
- All of the Write Around Portland staff over the years—Rhea Wolf, Shik Love, Blaine Merker, Debbie Cravey, Paulette Carter, Paul Lipscomb, Emily Trinkaus and Kaarin Smith. I am especially grateful to Sara Guest, Dawn Thompson and Beth White, our current staff, for their exceptional talent and dedication to this organization. It is a joy to do this work with them.

- The more than 2,500 workshop participants who opened themselves to this experience, who pushed themselves to write, to share and to connect, even when—especially when— it was the hardest. Thank you for sharing your words with us.

And to you, for reading this anthology, for being a part of this unique organization, this community of Write Around Portland.

In the spirit of this 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary, I offer you my own three lines:

*Holding space  
listening deeply  
respecting*

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Haiku  
by La’Velle Woods

In my life I’ll stand,  
Never forgetting the past,  
Learning and moving.

Always give a chance  
Not knowing when you’ll need one.  
Karma. Pace yourself.

I’m confused and dazed.  
Dark room with no opening.  
Light. My God. My door.

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