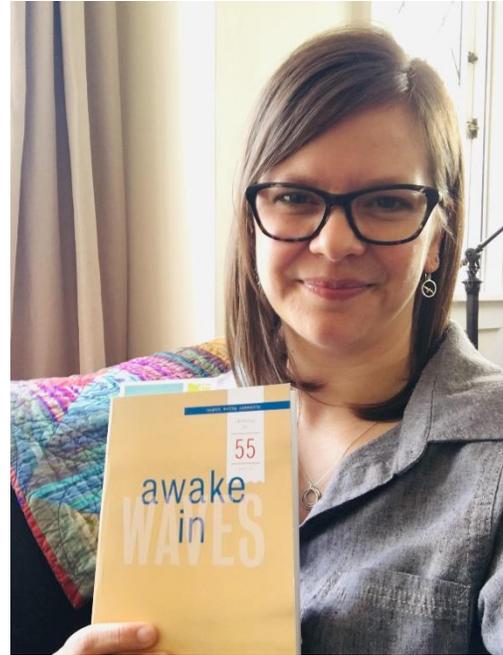


# Featured Writer Julia Matakis

Julia Matakis, 41, grew up on the shores of Lake Superior in Duluth, Minnesota and lived in Minnesota until moving to the Seattle area briefly before landing in Portland two and a half years ago. With training in maternal and child public health, she has worked with trauma survivors in numerous populations and communities over her career. Julia spent time in the NICU after the births of both of her children and experienced post-traumatic stress symptoms as a result of her time there and the medical trauma that accompanied the birth of your youngest child. She now works as a leadership coach, and her son and daughter are doing fine. In fall 2018, Julia participated in our creative writing workshop at NICU Families Northwest for parents of NICU babies.



## Sweet Child O'Mine

Julia Matakis

Looking back, there is so much I wish I had known. Like that the first time you get your period it looks an awful lot like you shit your pants—but just a little. Or that it's true that once you start shaving your legs, you really can't ever stop without looking like a gorilla. Except you can—I wish I'd known that, too. I wish I'd known that someday I'd wish for all those hours back that I spent watching *The Cosby Show*, wishing I had a dad like that. I wish someone had told my second grade self to save her stamps instead of allowing me to pepper President Reagan with so much fan mail. But there are other, probably bigger things that I wish I'd known. Like that it wasn't my twelve-year-old self's fault that that grown-ass-man who looked like the orchestra teacher at my soon-to-be junior high shoved his junk in my face and tried to pull off my swimsuit while I was wasting time working on my Minnesota tan, listening to Poison and Guns N' Roses on the beach that summer day. And I wish that I'd known that I could have learned to play the cello, anyway, instead of switching to Band at the last minute and then trying (and giving up on) first the clarinet (because *no one* can *start* on the saxophone) then the flute, then nothing, because I only wanted to play the cello. I wish I would have known how much this all would make my heart hurt when my nine-and-a-half year-old stepdaughter came home after her fourth week of violin lessons and demanded she be able to learn the cello, or how the tears would fall—confusing every one—when she came home from her first lesson, deeply proud as she played her first notes for me.

I wish I had known that those moments on the beach nearly thirty years ago would only be one of so many #metoo moments that so slyly shaped me—leaving no part of me unsculpted, undefined by them. What I wore, what I said, what I believed my choices could be or what my responsibilities were. I wish I had known that at almost forty-two years old, after twenty years of chiseling away at the residue and grime this toxic cultural shitstorm has left shellacked across my life, I'd only begin to start hearing what my own music sounds like again.

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## Interview with Featured Writer Julia Matakis

*Interviewed by Write Around Portland volunteer Alexa Weinstein*

### **What brought you to the Write Around Portland workshop at NICU Families Northwest?**

I had tried to get some help for what I knew to be PTSD symptoms. Life is so funny—in graduate school, one of my colleagues was a neonatologist who studied PTSD in NICU parents. At the time it was just beyond my experience, I wasn't interested in the topic because I couldn't relate. And now here I was.

Talking with my OB, I said, *This is what I'm experiencing, and I know it's PTSD.* She said, *Yes, it sounds like it, but we don't have a really good way to plug you into anything.* There are so few (accessible) resources for NICU parents. It's really hard, with a newborn and a toddler, to get in, and to go and see someone. Especially without any support. And even when I (finally) did get in for a consultation, I found [the provider] wholly unhelpful.

Upon landing in Portland soon after my son's birth in 2016, I could feel I was not myself. I was experiencing a host of post-traumatic stress symptoms, and I knew it. I also knew I couldn't fix things myself. So, I plugged in to this organization, NICU Families Northwest. When I was in the NICU in Seattle, I found it really helpful to talk to other parents. It was the most helpful thing. So, when NICU Families Northwest posted something about a collaboration with Write Around Portland, I was like, yes.

### **What was your experience like in the workshop?**

The first workshop I attended was held in a fire station on the river with a beautiful view of the Willamette and downtown. And I immediately fell in love with the elegant, simple model that Write Around Portland uses. Such an open and easy and acceptable invitation to my own voice. And then to be surrounded by these brilliant and amazing people who have equally challenging stories. It was everything that I had been missing.

Sometimes we would write about something that's not even related (to being a NICU parent), but it turns out it *is* related, it always is. It comes out of that same space that holds your bigger story. I have spent my whole career working in the space of story and the impact (positive and negative) on well-being. Here was a nonprofit with a mission to create the creative space for people to be with themselves and others, and just put pen to paper and see what happens. No pressure, no judgement. I love the rigor—breaking things down and talking about poetry and structure. I loved that.

I think there is no better investment in humanity than what Write Around Portland does, in so many ways and spaces. I think it is a huge gift to all of us.

### **How did it feel to have this piece published in the anthology?**

Honestly, I hoped this one wouldn't be selected. I hadn't talked about it with anybody. It was one of those things. So much of our stories come from bad things that happened, sometimes at the hands of someone else. There's a tension between letting that person be the person they are now, versus wanting or needing to tell my story. I want to be clear about what my motivations are, and also be mindful of the impact that it could have.

I haven't shared this with my parents, for example, who let me hang out on that beach by myself every day that summer. And if they knew this, I know that it will hurt their hearts. This is where I want to grow as a writer, because I haven't written things that do speak to so many people and to my passion for the kind of work that I want to do, moving forward. I know I'm always caretaking other people's feelings, and this was my first attempt at letting that go. Because it was a simple moment, and not simple at all.

### **What was it like to read this piece at the community reading, after it was selected?**

I was really grateful for the opportunity to read it out loud. But I almost didn't show up. I was surprised by how much I was resisting that. But then I was really struck by how many people came up to me afterward.

That's what makes me so angry about this #metoo moment we're in—the pervasiveness of it. That was not the worst thing that's happened to me. But it's almost like it was the plug that releases the dam. For all of us. That's what Kavanaugh was, too. And now my work is really being driven by that, by the collective trauma we all experienced. I would like to go bigger with this.

### **What's the role of music in your life now?**

I haven't found an instructor yet, but I'm going to learn cello and bring it full circle. Until I wrote this piece, I don't think I would have said that was a thing I still held on to. That prompt—"I wish I had known..."—brought me back to that moment. And in the space of that ten-minute write, I pulled the thread and it all unraveled, and that's where I saw it.

The prompts are so innocuous that you can go anywhere you want with it, but it creates a tension to pull on something. Then you get to pull it further and further. And then through the group process, you get to decide—with the help of other people—where to look further, and where to dig, and where to build up. And how you want to scaffold one idea to the next, to figure out what more is there for you. I think that's what this did for me: it pulled a thread.

In my work as a coach, a lot of what I do is helping people understand the thread that needs to be pulled so it doesn't bind you.

### **How did this workshop help you in your life?**

So many people don't understand what PTSD looks like in new moms, or how long it can last. It was two years before I felt like I had a handle of things. Before I felt better. In no small part due to Write Around Portland, without a doubt.

NICU Families Northwest created that opportunity, and it was up to me to walk into it. And Write Around Portland offered the container. It's a partnership that fully requires me to show up.

Write Around Portland is an effective intervention, and you don't need to call it an intervention to know that it is. I've spent my entire life looking for an intervention like this. An organization doing it in this really beautiful way that heals people when they need healing. This is a really critical piece of building resilience.