

Am I Really A Writer?

Is a poet who hasn't written a poem in fifteen years really a poet? Is a writer who's spent the past two decades cranking out marketing strategies and merchandising copy really a writer?

For years I ignored the pesky voice that whispered these questions in my ear. I had work to do. Meetings to attend. Focus groups and agency briefings to run.

And I had a family. A husband. A daughter. Piano lessons to pay for, aging parents to worry about half a continent away.

What's more, I didn't know a single other poet. Not a "real" one anyway. I had long since lost touch with the friends from my graduate school creative writing program in Montana. Our beloved instructor, Richard Hugo, was thirty years dead.

But that voice never left my ear. It was always there, reminding me: *you're a poet*. As my retirement date approached in 2014, it grew louder. When people asked what I planned to do with my new life, I in fact had no plan, but I found myself saying, "I'm going to write."

When I told this to a neighbor here in Manzanita, she asked if I knew the Hoffman Center held a writing group every week. You mean that ramshackle place with the skeleton in the window? Eww. What is that place anyway?

I had no idea that here in this little town was a vibrant community of artists and writers. For twenty years I had come and gone like I suppose many second-home owners do, looking for quiet downtime, not really caring if I got to know anyone other

than a few neighbors and familiar retailers. Dixie at the Wine Bar, the gruff old meat guy at the Little Apple. Doris at the fabric store down in Wheeler. That was enough for me.

But if I was going to write again, I needed support.

My first venture into the Writing Lounge was terrifying. Tuesday sessions were being held at Tela's house while the Hoffman Center was being refurbished. I sat at her kitchen table with six strangers. It was a silent writing day.

I mean *really* silent. Just the click of keyboards and the scratching of pens, the surf and the occasional heavy sighs of Tela's enormous black dog. I was so self-conscious my palms sweated on my notebook. I have no idea what I wrote.

At the given time, Tela asked if anyone wanted to share. NO WAY, I screamed to myself. And I didn't.

But I went back.

It started to be fun. Prompts nudged me to write on topics I never would have touched on my own. Fragments became drafts. Drafts got better.

When Lindsay Hill came to the Writers Series and read from his beautiful book *Sea of Hooks*, I dared to sign up for the open mic. That year, he selected one of my poems for the Squid.

I started to believe I was a writer. A poet.

Since I first came to the Writing Lounge in 2014, I've taken writing classes in Portland and jumped head-first into a second writing degree, this one at Pacific University in Forest Grove. I don't have a book yet, but I've published more than 40 poems, placed in contests, and am almost ready to submit my first manuscript to publishers.

Even though writing is a solitary endeavor — just you and the page — I believe every writer needs community. For encouragement and support of course, but also because we need to know there are others like us, others who also love this incredibly intense and private thing we do, who like us, can lose themselves for hours searching for just the right way to make a thought come alive.

I found that community here.

Emily Ransdell

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