

Leah Soderberg

“We No Longer Need Weapons”

So many of us writers, rather than embodying the cliché of “losing ourselves,” develop into what can only be understood as entirely the opposite. Settling into the isolation inherent in the act of writing, we become lost *within* ourselves, as well as the world we’ve constructed on the page, both fictional and personal. Certainly, I can say with confidence that I have stood as a part of this group, as a “self-obsessed writer.” At twenty-four years old, I’ve never held a full-time job, let alone traveled beyond the North American continent. I entered the MFA program at Arizona State immediately following my undergraduate education: degree in hand, ready to illuminate the world with my poetry, but without so much of the actual experience of being, living—encountering the horrors and pleasures, all the people and infinite minds—of this big, big world. Though I’d still argue that my verve was admirable, if a bit naïve, I quickly realized that a large part of my education as an MFA candidate here at ASU couldn’t be found through reading and writing. Rather, it could only be realized by leaving the life I had so carefully constructed on the page and seeing the world, gathering new experience in ways that, at the time, I couldn’t have comprehended. Consequently, I am very grateful that I was allowed my first immersion into international travel with the funding provided to me through my fellowship from the Piper Center.

Over the span of nearly six weeks, I visited the countries of Hong Kong, China, Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. I ate water buffalo and snake meat, spent two days hiking along the Nam Tha River, climbed the crumbling steps of Angkor Wat. I felt reverberations of the monks chanting from Doi Suthep mountain pulse through my body, stood at the Great Wall of China, as millions of others before me, in unabashed awe. I could easily spend pages detailing my travels, all the things I did, the souvenirs I collected, and the memories I will carry with me in the coming years.

Certainly, my experiences abroad will impact my writing. After a first trip abroad, let alone to a region so vastly different from one’s own, this is to be expected. What has come unexpectedly to me, however, is the overwhelmingly large impact of what, at the time, were seemingly insignificant moments. One in particular that comes to mind is the sight of a billboard on the border of the Cambodian city of Siem Reap, printed with five English words, “We No Longer Need Weapons,” and two accompanying illustrations—one of Cambodian children being handed guns by soldiers, the other of the same children being handed only books. Seated in the cabin of a speeding motorcycle rickshaw, if I had blinked or turned away for even a second, I would have missed it. That brief glimpse, however, became a jarring and lasting reminder, not just of the horrifying history of the country, but of the influence, the impact that writing has on our world. As writers, our words can build or destroy, inspire or disgust. They can encourage some to pick up a weapon and kill, others to lay down their weapons and discuss. Our writing can posit questions of the ordinary and make the extraordinary familiar. Maybe most importantly, yet most often forgotten, is that it stands for us where we are not present, has the potential to live so much longer than our own bodies. It is a legacy that exists not just as us in the world, but our ideas, and the ideas within others that our words can awaken. It was a reminder to me of why I am a writer, and why

writing is so much more than just me telling of myself, telling the stories that I've created within the solitude of the page. For that, more than anything, I am grateful for this experience.