SEE OUR SEA

An anthology of the writers from the California Rehabilitation Center at Norco

Spring 2018

Edited by Nik De Dominic and Kate Levin
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Nik De Dominic and Kate Levin would like to thank the following for making this truly transformative semester at the California Rehabilitation Center at Norco possible:

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Alternative Anthology Titles

Smoke and Mirrors
Writings from the Zoo
Stories from the Blue
Talking to My Memories
The Best of CRC’s Creative Writing Class
Paperwork
Voices Behind a Fence
Hyperbole from Behind the Wire
Chronicles of the Oppressed
Vague Thoughts Through the Corridors of the Hotel California
Metaphors from the Castigates
Simple Thoughts
To the Page
Joy Is Such Human Madness
Visitor
Reflection

Kate Levin

Nobody has phones or laptops in our California Rehabilitation Center classroom. We have notebooks, pens, our voices, faces, memories, perspectives, and words. As a result of this (though not only as a result of this), I’ve found the teaching experience at CRC a remarkably concentrated and human one. It’s also true that before our Saturdays at CRC I’d never thought quite so much about—never felt so viscerally—the phenomenon of respect in the classroom: for each other, for the published work we read and discuss, for the writing we generate in class, for the act of listening.

Our classes at CRC have also given me occasion to think about connection, and about magic. The magic of hearing Rocco Moschetti read “Bees and Smoke” aloud—“threads of honey,” he’d written. *Threads* of honey. Of course honey exists in threads! I’d seen it, but I’d never known it until Rocco’s magical piece revealed what had been there all along. Another sound I won’t soon forget: the snapping of Carlos Carranza’s fingers high in the air as Scottie Dova Carter finished reading his piece “Basic Human Math”—the sound of celebration, of connection.

James Baldwin wrote, “It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive.” I am proud of this book for being nothing less than an undeniable, irrevocable testament to human connection.
The American Dream

Carlos Carranza

People immigrate from Mexico
In hopes of a better life they let everything go
Here in the land of opportunity things start out rough
They can’t speak English and their income is never enough

THE AMERICAN DREAM

Through hard work they strive and pave the way
For the future of a son who’s on his way
Life starts to get better as they embrace their new home
No doubt their son will succeed once he has grown

THE AMERICAN DREAM

They settle down in an all Mexican neighborhood
And try to raise their son as best as they could
The kid makes friends and at the park they hang
The crew gets older and they start to bang

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The parents try to talk to him but he doesn’t listen
There’s a gang feud so he’s off on a mission
The gang’s the same race and shares the same struggle
Still they hate each other and cause a lot of trouble

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The parents get a phone call late one night
They’re asked to identify a body dead from a fight
In this land of milk and honey they tried to persevere
The American dream has become an American nightmare
Reflection

Jacob Lester

Epistemology in prison. It sounds like the sort of pretentious title a graduate student in philosophy would slap atop his or her thesis, followed by a colon and then several lines of more explicit description of the paper’s contents. It sounds inaccessible. Esoteric. Remote from all except those on the very top floors of the ivory tower.

Yet it’s exactly what I encountered during my first session with the student-inmates at the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco: a lively discourse over the nature and feasibility of truth and knowledge, prompted by an astute observation made by one of the students as part of an in-class writing assignment. From the start, the students in our creative writing class were motivated to learn, appreciative of the outlet for creative energy that – incarcerated or not – is often denied the space it needs to unfold. These students seemed to find such a space on the pages of their composition notebooks, pages they filled with jaunty stories of boyish misadventures, haunting profiles of loved ones on the other side of a razor wire fence, and variegated musings on the meaning that can be drawn from time in prison – from time, life, in general.

There’s a series of posters that hangs on the wall of the room where our class meets on Saturday afternoons. Each bears the name and definition of a different rhetorical device. Idiom. Simile. Alliteration. Hyperbole. “Hyperboles from behind the wire,” a student sitting next to me leaned over and offered when asked for ideas on what to title this anthology. It was supposed to be a nonfiction writing class. But what’s non-fiction without selective exaggeration? Doesn’t the truth sometimes deserve more room to breathe than the confines of the literal? It’s not a lie: it’s a tool. A little hyperbole is something we’re all guilty of.
Basic Human Math

Scottie Dova Carter

An abandoned child (+) a foster family in financial crisis (-) two supportive role models.

(X) an unknown family history rounding up to calling no place home.

Now the fractions, God I hate fractions:

\[
\frac{\text{Hopeless Romantic}}{\text{No Emotional Support}} \times \frac{\text{Slightly Egotistical}}{\text{Overly Active Libido}}
\]

With the misuse of alcohol to mask the pain as the common denominator leaving a remainder of emotional detachment.

Now I think I’ll add (or is it subtract) 11 years of depraved ministry.

P.E.M.D.A.S., that’s right: paradise evades me with delusions applauding security.

Ah, yes, divide by the square root of 1 soul draining toxic, heartbreaking relationship with a remainder of picking up the phone like bygones are bygones, and don’t forget to carry the hope.

This will all equal (=) one lonely, at times cynical, pessimistic heart who’s far too optimistic about the future because his past is but a dream he once had.
Reflection

Jasmine Benitez

In the little time we got to share a space of creativity, we all definitely used it to its full capacity and beyond. In this space it was not prisoners writing, it was simply people writing. It was people expressing and words dancing on the page to different rhythms. I think I took as much from this course as the students did, and from each of them I took a different memory to value and use in times where I feel stuck in my own writing. It was pretty cool to witness their minds unfold in front of us and hopefully they learned something from us young kids. Regardless, I can confidently say I was very touched by what each student had to share and hopefully they never stop writing because everyone should be reading what these guys have to say.
My Rock

Perry Dionisiou

Growing up I had a solid rock. I loved my rock. No matter what I would do I knew I could always go to my rock. When I would get upset and the world seemed to shake around me and I needed something solid to hold, I had my rock. When my life seemed to crumble around me I knew I could hold my rock and put my feet on solid ground again. When everybody around me disappeared and forgot who I was my rock still came to see me and never forgot me. When I felt nobody cared and I had no reason to live, just wanted to fade and blow away, my rock grabbed me and reminded me how important I am and made me solid again. My rock til this day comes every weekend and visits me and reminds me I am important and how much I am missed. My rock is my mother.
Reflection

Carolyn Nguyen

I’m sorry.

From the moment I was approached with the offer to be a part of PEP, the thoughts of, “What if it’s unsafe? Should I do this?” plagued my mind. As excited as I was to be a part of PEP, it didn’t help that those around me also vocalized my concerns. I was scared, and I had no idea what to expect.

By the end of those two hours during my first day at the facility, my prejudices and fears were assuaged as I listened to you all share the most heartfelt stories. I have come to love taking part in the laughter and the vulnerability, and I wish this class didn’t have to come to an end. Listening to John’s favorite memory about riding in a paddleboat with his dad and getting splashed, Rocco describing his wife as a hand-carved wooden box, or Lawrence expressing his love for cars, are only some of the memories I will carry with me for life. I came to realize from this experience, that we are all humans with stories that need to be shared. There’s so much to be learned when we take the time to sit and listen in a safe space where we are capable of vulnerability.

So I am sorry, from the bottom of my heart, for being so close-minded in the beginning that I could only imagine you all as menacing thugs. For making such rash decisions about who you all were before hearing your story. For judging based only on appearances and what society has told us how to feel about inmates.

I am so grateful to this program for opening my eyes and giving me the opportunity to meet all of you. When I tell people that I volunteer in a prison correctional facility, they look at me with such surprise. But I want to change their perception just like how you’ve changed mine. Literally every person I’ve met and told about PEP, I have emphasized the idea that we are all simply humans that need love and compassion, and wanting to spread that message everywhere, everyday is because of you all. You all have changed my life. This experience has left an indelible mark on me, and I am so thankful for those Saturday doses of vulnerability and wisdom. I have learned so much from you all.
I remember Carter had asked me on the first day I started why I wanted to do this in the first place, and I told him that I think it’s important to see things from different perspectives. I feel like I have accomplished what I had set out to do, and I couldn’t have done it without your willingness to share about who you are. Thank you for everything, I’m going to miss you all.
Kaleidoscopical

Ray E.M. Embry, Jr.

I’m a dad, brother, uncle and even a grandfather that likes to examine reality and issues and daily life on an everyday basis, especially in this clueless world called incarceration. This, as you could imagine, is extremely challenging, even downright impossible.

I examine quite often the fictitious similes that surround me and provide me with what some would consider masters of craft in the world of entertainment and drama. I witness phantoms and wizardry beyond fantasy. Hallucinations that are so vivid and colorful that one can’t help but to be almost convinced of its reality. Being here is like being saturated by shifting views and wolves in sheeps’ clothing. There’s a saying here in prison that says that, “You can find out who most of the demons are by going to the chapel on Sundays where they congregate.”

But, that all seems unfair, unjust, and limited to judgment from the choir preaching to the church. And which that, my perception has greatly changed. Now, instead of trying to change prison, I’ve submitted to being changed by prison, because I’ve come to the conclusion that we as humans all have something to mask. Whether it’s untrue, unfortunate, unrealistic, delusional, sacred, distorted, or extremely altered we all have skeletons in the closet. In this prison world, even if a lie is seen or heard, the word in which to repair or explain that situation is also seen as a lie. We’re all so quick to pounce on each other and point multiple fingers that it almost feels natural and satisfying just to know the noose isn’t around our own neck. That is something the world is suffering from… finger pointing.

My dad called it the “crab in the bucket syndrome.” That’s when you have a cool amount of crabs in a bucket and one tries to escape, they all come together to pull the escapee back down into the bucket where the struggle originally started. I feel what the crab was trying to get… some sort of freedom, freedom from being boiled alive by the world that deems you a bottom feeder in the ocean (outside world) and a delicacy above water (prison world—financially).

However, now it’s all about reality, and that kinda sucks. Because
now you’re put in check by your own reality… your own skeletons, and with that comes new questions with the hope of wise answers. Questions like, do you know who you are? Are you really about what you THINK you’re about? Do you want to keep taking instead of giving? Is this all that there is to this thing called life? These are things which puzzle my mind now. Now it’s time to develop wisdom via self knowledge which in essence means knowing oneself, others and how things work on a reality basis.

For years I’ve been in denial, kinda like being in a fog or stuck in some kind of delusional kaleidoscope that’s filled with the colors I only want to see. All the while, knowing full-fuck well that others here in prison and outside of these walls, are experiencing the same kind of color-distortion that I face. Just because the kaleidoscope shifts its lens to the right (outside world) or the left (prison world) just a smidge, doesn’t mean that we all see different colors, we all see vivid colors, but when do we realize that we’re all looking through the SAME lens? When do we all come together to understand and realize that we’re all viewing life from the same dysfunctional kaleidoscopic lens and that all of our vision is blurred? Our views of the different color schemes we view as reality causes us to hate and overpowers us to gossip, judge and overreact to colors that aren’t in that same spectrum as our own view. Now that I see my own colors I’m capable of witnessing and acknowledging the beauty in viewing all the other vivid colors that I couldn’t see or fathom. My distorted viewpoint was parallel to a weak flame on a candlestick. If you really want to keep it “REAL,” and be honest with ourselves, we’re all in the process of being fixed and nothing or anyone is an independent, eternal self or a concrete entity. We’re all a work in progress. And with that new found wisdom, I’m more aware of others and what they consider meaningful to life. I’m learning how to breathe again, to serve, contribute, relax, feel, listen and evolve. I’m trying with every fiber of my being to be compassionate and simplify my reality, my color scheme so that I don’t feel like my view of colors are superior to yours. Both of our color schemes can cultivate flexibility to open up meaningful collaboration to expand and radiate, to dissolve the previous black, gray and white encountered that was relentlessly and abundantly bestowed on all of us… constantly.
I’m now trying to open up and surrender to the wisdom of being born anew. To appreciate and celebrate a hero venturing forth from the world of common day into a supernatural wonder of beautiful forces that are encountered and then the battle would be decisively won. I wouldn’t mind being that hero that comes back from this mysterious adventure called prison, with the power to bestow some type of enhanced competencies that’ll help our fellow man to see a clearer view of the kaleidoscope.

That’s my reality now… the death of my own prison for the opportunity for a new perspective through the kaleidoscope of growth. To me there is no other practice which so intensifies life. Death from this prison life, when it’s approached won’t surprise me, it will be part of the full expectancy of life. We all may see different colors through the kaleidoscope lens, but it is still the same lens regardless of what colors we may seem to see… We just need to clean the lens.
Reflection

Esther Kim

Coming to CRC, I wasn’t sure what to expect from the few short weeks I’d be here. I was nervous, as I always am when I meet new groups of people. I hoped that the class wouldn’t be dead silent. Then, I got to class and met Carter who sat next to me. Carter – you are such a natural conversationalist with lots of interesting stories to tell. It was great to get to know your story through your writing. You felt that your homework piece wasn’t good enough to read aloud, but both your piece about your foster father and the story about the train as a metaphor for your love were so beautiful. Rocco’s story about Honey, Perry’s about going to the Redondo Beach Pier, and so many other unique voices still stick with me. Even after this class is over, I hope that you will look back at the pieces in this anthology to remember the discussions we shared in class. I’ll make use of Nik’s quote, and I hope you will too: “All writing is theft. Steal it, and make it your own.”
The Junkyard

John Lavaie

My good friend Armen has an auto dismantling yard in Sun Valley. I spend a good amount of time there searching for autoparts. This place is my sanctuary. I often walk the aisles of stacked cars and rows of body parts and I think of life. I feel the cars reaching out to me to be fixed, to be rescued. Although they are weathered and rusty, dented and broken, I see so much potential in all of them. I feel so much hope. From the old Volkswagen bus to the Karmann Ghia, the 60's era Triumphs and MGs. Old Camaros and Mustangs, I want to fix them all. I see their unique personalities. The Jaguars with their British accents so Grey Poupon proper. The Fords with a southern accent and witty chrome. The Japanese cars speak with the pride of Japanese engineering. And the German cars with a strong German accent that’s so funny.

All of these cars have a story. A beginning and this horrible end. Armen has to always drive around in his forklift to find me, sometimes talking to cars. Having full conversations and making promises. How I’ll come back and fix them, they seem to know my name! Well, sometimes he’ll find me, sometimes he won’t. He thinks I’m crazy but I know it’s a familiar crazy because he doesn’t send me off. He’ll always express relief as I purchase a car awaiting the crusher. Sometimes the ones in the middle of the stack with a crushed roof. I’ve rescued more than I can count from the crusher. It’s appalling for the Firebird or Charger, Plymouth Furys, and Yugos to be crushed beyond repair. I have to fix them all! Make a beautiful show car out of a complete wreck. So much familiarity in these old cars. All hopefully reaching out to me.

The junkyard to me is a spiritual place of hope where I’m reminded of parts of myself that need repair or to be replaced. What parts need to be polished and what needs to be crushed. I remember sitting in a 20th anniversary 300ZX Turbo stacked four cars high. The sun came down and it was the most beautiful smog filled sunset I’ve ever seen. The sky seemed to explode in magnificent reds, orange-blues, and purples.
Damn, I was awaken out of a hypnotic haze by the sound of Armen’s vicious junkyard dogs. They seemed to bark with a hoarse voice. Kinda sounded like a ‘57 Chevy backfiring. Must be from all the motor oil they drink in their dirty water. I opened a window and looked down at them barking fierce at my intrusion. Those were the ugliest, jankiest, stankiest dogs I’ve ever seen.

They looked like they right out of the Pet Sematary. Well I came down and pet their heads and scratched their fleas as they relentlessly barked in my face. I didn’t show fear so they didn’t bite me. They never stopped barking and neither did I. But I knew their barks were a request for something to eat. So I took a trip to Tommy’s Burger and loaded up on chili-cheese burgers and came back to make peace with this ugly pack. And it felt like I made peace with the universe as I watched them devour their burgers. I promised to come back to the cars and the dogs as soon as I fulfilled an obligation, one that led me into a different kind of junkyard. Deja Vu strikes me. Lots of familiar feelings of doom and hope.

I choose hope and I’ve decided to be a source of hope to others around me. A lot of guys here remind me of different kinds of cars. Some need lots of restoration, some work on my restoration. Although I’m broken in so many ways, I’m still running. And I have the same vision I have of fixing those wrecked cars within myself. I see myself vindicated and restored, driving down P.C.H. with the top down, absorbing all the sun rays and I breathe the ocean mist.

I started writing about Armen’s cool stuff, but it feels like his stuff is all of our stuff. And I look around in this other human junkyard and it feels once again like all of the world’s stuff. And I realize that the world needs more mechanics. And we’ll restore each other. Piece by piece. Part by part.
Reflection

Hannah Leibson

One of my professors once told me, walk towards the things that scare you. But often times it’s much more difficult to face our largest fears than push them away and shut the door. Over the course of my time at NORCO, I’ve had the privilege to witness 15 courageous men give their hearts to the page, and keep that door wide open. Every week, I was truly blown away by depth and honesty that each member of the class brought to the table. It’s given me inspiration in my own writing to ask more of myself, and push myself to the core of the stories I am most afraid to tell. Storytelling is about connections in unlikely places, and the shared experience of life’s greatest joys and failures. As Malachi eloquently wrote in his contribution, life is about going beyond the colors in the Kaleidoscope that we choose to see. It’s about seeing the colors on the periphery, and finding the commonalities that unite us all.
A Perfect Little Angel

Ruben Leiva

A day after the 4th of July a mother has a boy and names him Ruben Matthew Leiva. Something unique she said. A doctor says he's like a perfect little angel. Something he tried to be, but even a perfect little angel can be a hell raiser. From an early age he was a perfect child. Tried his hardest to do good in school and out of it. When he was only 5 years old he was working on computers. That's where he developed a love for it. That was around the same time his father was thrown in jail for shooting someone. Ruben's father was a lovable, stern, and driven man who just wanted the best for his children. Ruben's mother was a hard-working, laid-back, young mother. At that year his mother has a sister. Named a lady version of Ruben's father. Living in a place like Bell Gardens, all his siblings were born in LA Hospital. Raised in LA. They all find out that early life can be a bit shitty but it always brings the true beauty of life like when Ruben was on his trip to Colorado. With his home school. Of course regular public school wasn’t for him. High school for a teenage boy was a daily struggle with gangs, teachers, and problems at home. So Ruben was told by one of his friends to go to home school which was his only possibility to graduate. He always put 210% into everything he did, especially school. Then, his assistant teacher offered him a two-week field trip to a ranch in Colorado. He went working in the kitchen, feeding the animals, and cleaning up after them to gather the hours he needed for his 10 hours of community service. On his last day, Ruben worked cleaning the ranch before a hike to the mountain, but tired from the one yesterday through the Colorado Rockies through the waterfalls to national landmarks. But today was going to start bright and early like it had for two weeks. It was before the sun came over the mountains and he is at the peak of the mountain with the other people who were on the trip. When the sun finally came over the Rockies it gave the mountains a color purple, pink, and red. It was that day when Ruben learned to appreciate life day to day. Through relationships like the first week where his group had to spill their deepest darkest
secret, making them closer. Or the day he had to walk through a labyrinth and leave a message for the next people who came. After throwing a rock that was filled with everything bad in your life so you leave it in the river of the Colorado Rockies. Til this day Ruben still remembers what he wrote in the rock in the labyrinth. He wrote two words: “Be positive.” Those two weeks changed Ruben’s life forever, living every moment with family, friends, and music. Listening to anything but mostly oldies such as Paul Anka, Richie Valens, and Elvis, remembering the sweet smell of the Colorado pine trees. Transporting him to Colorado every time he hears oldies. Living through the Bible like his middle name Matthew like the first book of the gospel Matthew, the tax collector. With one thing in common, the love of money.
Nostalgic Warnings Buried in Music
Laurence James Lott Jr.

“Ain’t No Sunshine When She’s Gone” is a classic song by Bill Withers that transcends time and age, proving that there is a song for every season in our lives.

Certain songs freeze memories in moments that take you back to a place, like a time capsule with all the people who played their assigned parts orchestrated by fate, time, and space.

Smokey Robinson lit up the airwaves in 1960 with the “Tears of a Clown When There’s No One Around.” Describing the feelings of every man who’s been let down by love, grasping the fact that everyone is hurt by love and men can cry and that it is ok to love and feel the pain that love sometimes brings, where hurt feelings evolve into the best sad songs. But we sometimes hide behind ideas of unreturned love to the tune of heartfelt sadness.

He would then turn around on the same airwaves and shout, “You Better Shop Around,” contradicting the last song with his hurt feelings through the face of a clown, then rage to the beat that you better make the best choice when it comes to the matters of the heart.

Love songs have always had their place in every person’s rollercoaster life, so much so that I’ve learned that music can calm the savage beast in the worst of us, but some of us use music to connect the dots in a trendy world.

Seems like the poet songwriters of my time sang of warnings to not tread the stormy waters they sank in, but we being young and naive chose to navigate the same waters and sank faster than the Titanic. How come we never heed the warning of wisdom in a song?

Then there was post Martin Luther King and the Vietnam era where it seems like all was lost and Marvin Gaye woke up everyone, singing, “What’s Going On?” I guess a question we all wanted the answer to.

Blacks had more rights and freedom and change had come at a price, but if you’re free to choose and you have no direction what to choose, then freedom is not what you thought it to be. We became lost.
As we tried to grasp the half-hearted equality granted to us, Curtis Mayfield would sing, “Superfly,” a black made film about a successful pimp as we found a new direction as pimps.

We quickly found the flaws in that direction and needed some new influence.

As drugs flooded our neighborhoods, “Do the Hustle,” was a song we could respect and hustle we did.

As we sang and danced our lives away laws would change and the penal system would enlarge from 6 institutions to 35, not including private institutions and CCFs to the sum of 53 in total.

Then David Bowie would croon, “This is not America, Sha la la la la,” a song that had more meaning than I would ever fully grasp until now. He spread out words about a snowman President and who knew where that would lead.

But a group named Chic would tell us “these are good times, leave your troubles behind,” and we did, never thinking about the consequences, just the payoff. To the tune of alcohol and drugs. There was only party songs and discos and parties to attend. There were no worries in sight to the end result of a liquor store on every corner and a drug dealer even closer. Yeah, good times perished like spoiled food left in an abandoned apartment, just another casualty of a new war. A people way too blind to see the devices that still had them imprisoned.

Denise Williams sang “Free,” and who knew the sting it would resonate, a kind of truth, clear reality check and still we didn’t get the hint. So the powers that be helped it along making mistakes and paying stiff penalties.

Enter rap and hip-hop, the end results would usher in and help fill a penal system unbeknowningly. Gangsta rap turned children into killers and killers to lifers, but it made for good listening.

The Black Eyed Peas would ask “Where is the Love?,” which became almost a foreign language to a youth taught differently. How is love learned if parents are not there to teach it?

Songs should all promote virtue, love, integrity, and compassion. But they don’t. Songs are the new advertisements for everyone. Shouldn’t it mean something?
Reflection
Mazen Loan

Overall, I am very glad I volunteered at CRC. At the orientation, the director of the program explained that since we would be the next generation of practitioners, it was integral that we participate in projects such as these. At the time, I did not completely understand what he meant – What was the connection? Now I think I know what he was getting at. Let me preface this discussion that I believe there are some bad people out there. Not just because of psychological issues, but because their beliefs and ideals are incompatible with the idea of a common basic decency that all humans owe each other by virtue. Now, how these type of people should be treated is a question for another time. But what I do want to underscore is the idea that not all people in prison share this nature.

My time at CRC has taught me that not all prisoners are bad people, but are more often people who have made mistakes. Does that mean they are not responsible and culpable for their actions? No, of course not. However, realizing that this distinction exists is the first step towards seeing these prisoners as more than just criminals – remembering that they too are are fathers, sons, and brothers, they too have sacrificed, and they too have suffered hardships. I said before that I believe these individuals are responsible for their actions. But at the same time, part of me feels that these mistakes could have been prevented if the government had been more proactive. Maybe one of our students wouldn’t have been in prison if the army had provided him with adequate healthcare, which would have led to a positive diagnosis of PTSD from the Iraq war. The distinction between bad people and those who make mistakes, albeit terrible ones, is an important (but tricky) contrast. However, just because it is difficult to establish and convince people of this duality does not mean that it doesn’t exist, nor does it imply that this feat is not worth undertaking.
Bees and Smoke
Rocco Moschetti

I went to stay with my grandparents on their farm one summer. I was about 10 years old. They had a small orchard in northwestern New Mexico where my grandfather, a native of Pound, Virginia, grew bright apples of five different varieties. There were deep red Romas, shiny yellow Transparents, speckled MacIntoshes, brilliant Red Deliciouses, and flawless Granny Smith apples.

At one end of the orchard, there sat two white wooden boxes where honey bees worked carrying nectar and pollen from the apple blossoms into the hives. These two hives were the source of the golden honey that sat on my grandmother’s kitchen table waiting to be served in a generous dollop on top of her steaming homemade biscuits with melted butter from their brown Guernsey milk-cow and washed down with glasses of cold milk fresh from the cow. My grandmother would stream long amber threads of honey into her streaming cup of herbal tea in the morning and briskly stir it into her dainty china cup with a flourish, clinking her teaspoon and slurping noisily.

Near the end of the summer on the farm, my grandfather asked me if I wanted to help harvest the honey. As I trotted along beside him, I helped carry the tools he would need in a sparkling metal bucket. As I ran to keep up with him, I snatched apples up off the ground and bit into their juicy white flesh. Later the fallen apples would be picked up by my grandmother and made into apple pies, cobblers, and packed into mason jars to preserve a small piece of fall days and warm sunshine for the long winters.

It was a sunny fall day as my grandfather laid out his tools. A gleaming bucket with a tight-fitting lid to put the honeycomb in, a trowel for scraping the hive clean, and a metal canister with a leather bellows to pump smoke into the hive. As he put damp burlap onto a piece of smoldering charcoal in the bottom of the smoke can, he explained that smoke calms the bees by filling their breathing tubes and preventing them from bending their abdomen forward to drive home the stinging barb. As he waved the smoke over the hive in a
cloud and sent a few puffs into the opening of the wooden boxes, the bees took to the air. Their angry droning hum sounded a little intimidating, but the smoke worked as it was supposed to. Those that landed on you couldn’t sting. As he opened the hive I glimpsed the golden honeycomb dripping sweet treasure. We were like plundering pirates raiding helpless ships in a sea of grass, surrounded by waves of apple trees in neat rows. As we loaded our bucket with gold, my grandfather told me how to avoid getting stung as he put more smoke into the air and in the recesses of the hive. “Use a veil,” he told me, “and of course there’s the smoke, but still you risk getting stung, even then,” he said, “but she (all worker bees are female) has a painful sting. She has a fearsome reputation. But to someone who knows the nature of the honeybee, the rewards far outweigh the risks.”

The rewards that day were gallons of pure sweet honey. Honey is liquid sunshine. It is flowers concentrated under blue skies. Honey is a golden treasure that is packed with life, sun, wind, and labor. Honey is waiting to be tasted. It is waiting to touch sticky fingers to tongues, to drizzle streams of amber and gold into waiting cups of tea, to smear onto hot biscuits with melting butter dripping down chins. Honey is all of the best things in life boiled down, concentrated, and capped off with hexagons of amber and white wax.

Years later, I was showing my own children the rewards of the honeybees’ labors in my own backyard orchard. I thought back to that autumn day and the lessons I learned. The honeybee is perfectly capable of defending her hive and the fruits of her labors to the death. But the beekeeper doesn’t want it to go that far. He preserves the source of his livelihood that he depends upon for the future. He calms the bees with his smoke. He takes precautions to prevent painful stings, like wearing a veil and beekeeper’s garb. He only takes what he needs, and leaves the rest to sustain the bees through the winter. Even though the beekeeper knows that despite all his precautions, he risks getting stung. Every beekeeper has been stung in the past and will get stung again in the future. But he also knows that, as with anything else in life there are risks, but sometimes the risk are simply outweighed by the rewards.
Reflection

Nik De Dominic

When I first started writing some years ago, a teacher suggested that I type up passages from writers I liked. Somehow, through keystroking Kurt Vonnegut or Aimee Bender or Melville or Murakami, I’d absorb something of them, internalizing the rhythm of their sentences, their quirks and strengths, so one day those beautiful sentences could become my own. It was how I learned.

This semester, Kate Levin and I coordinated 7 undergraduate USC students to volunteer their time and teach creative nonfiction at the California Rehabilitation Center, in Norco, CA. We didn’t know what to expect although we certainly had our own cliched notions of what a prison is and who prisoners are. What our students proved was none of that. They were a group of thoughtful, motivated men passionate to learn, to experiment, to write. Ok, they liked bullshitting sometimes, too. The class wasn’t all business.

Due to the nature of prison and our students’ lack of access to technology, in order to offer their writing here, we had to type up each of these essays and, for the first time in 20 years, I felt like a student again, inhabiting the voices of these talented writers. Having their words come through my own fingers, I walked through a junkyard in Sun Valley, I tracked the history of 70s Los Angeles and social change through music, I chilled in a park on Sunday afternoon, my mom worrying back at the house, and I watched a father torment a little sister with a Crypt Keeper impersonation. As I typed our students’ Contributor’s Notes, I wept. I was a father, a brother, and son far away from home. I am thankful for our students’ honesty and grit. By them I was reminded that we read to understand each other and that we write to understand ourselves.
Author Biographies

Carlos Carranza was born in San Diego, CA, in 1990 to a Mexican mother. He attended school there until the 8th grade when he dropped out. That was when his career as a criminal began. Carlos went through several juvenile halls and camps as a kid. As an adult he graduated to county jails and prisons. He is currently in CRC Norco finishing his third term.

Scottie D. Carter lives in Riverside, CA. He writes, Wow, you read this. Well, I’m sorry I can’t give you the time back that you’ve lost on reading this. So, so sorry.

Perry Dionisiou is a first-generation American born from Mike and Sandy Dionisiou in Lynwood, California. Parents immigrated to United States from Greece. Grew up in Anaheim, California. I would like people to know everybody makes mistakes. Don’t let your mistakes define you. Take your mistakes and learn from them and build your character. Move on.

Ray E.M. Embry lives in Riverside Co, who’s now incarcerated at CRC, but will be out in the summer of 2019. I’m hoping to continue my higher education at, ummm… somewhere… who knows, go TROJANS. I need a gofundme.com account. I need $.

John Lavaie is a Persian American from Los Angeles, CA. He loves philosophy, writing, and restoring vintage cars and motorcycles.

Ruben Leiva lives in Riverside County. Of his essay “A Perfect Little Angel,” he says, “It is a piece of who I am.”

Lawrence James Lott Jr. was born in Los Angeles to what he thought was poverty but now realizes that this was his challenge and destiny to prevail above. He is a father and a business owner of reselling wholesale vehicles. He is married with 3 kids and enjoys fishing, horseback riding, and building cars. This was his first piece of literature but he doesn’t think it will be his last.
Rocco Moschetti was born on July 27, 1964 in Farmington, New Mexico. He was the only child of a 46 year old government trapper and the sixth child of a 39 year old bipolar, abusive and domineering waitress. Rocco learned to hunt and fish from his father and learned to be a sullen, rageful, violent person from his mother. To escape, he buried himself in books and movies. He read just about anything he could but eventually discovered science-fiction. He made poor grades in school and was finally sent to military school where he learned discipline and was commissioned as an army officer. He went on to study wildlife management until he was called upon to fight in the Gulf War in 1991. After the Gulf War he escaped again, this time to Alaska. He drove the Alcan Highway in his 1986 Ford pickup sleeping in the camper along the way through Canada in the winter. He arrived in Fairbanks with a shotgun, a rifle, a campstove, a sleeping bag and 40 dollars in his pocket. He worked pumping gas, doing maintenance work, as a domestic observer aboard Alaska fishing vessels, as a greenhouse grower, as a federal farm agent, and as a pest controller. He met his wife Jannine in a Seven-Eleven store in Fairbanks where they both worked at the time. They were married in 1993. They have three children.
CONTRIBUTORS:

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Ruben Leiva
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