

Underground Writing - Newsletter

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FREE SPACE

A. Muia | Teaching Writer

In juvenile detention, we always begin the workshop with a free write. It's a great term, free write—perhaps more meaningful here in juvie. Once in the system, many kids have a hard time getting free. Some don't feel free to leave the gang life they're involved in. Almost all feel trapped in their own thoughts, spending so much time in quiet, so much time alone in their cells to think.

But the writing workshop is a free space, when their thoughts can come out, take flight on the page. Even fly beyond the walls, as we carry their words to printed anthologies, to share aloud with audiences, to share with you in these updates. The students are grateful and surprised to learn that others are moved by their



NEW: Order our second anthology of student writing.

words.

I invite them to take up their golf pencils and notebooks, to put their thoughts on paper. There are two guards in the back of the room; they're writing too. We're all writing.

Sometimes this is a raw space. One student writes:

I be feelin' like I don't belong in this planet. Sometimes I wanna move far away, like Mars or sumthin.'

Another writes about how he feels in the writing workshop:

*This is me behind that red door.
When I'm in here, I feel nothing but excitement
like a kid bringing his favorite toy to show and tell
anxious to get out of my cell.*

One student shares his experience in juvie:

*I been having a hard time because I'm starting to like it here
and I don't want to get used to being locked up . . .*

“What do you like about being here?” I ask.

“I have food, clothes, a place to sleep,” he says. “I can take a shower . . .”

I ask if he's been homeless. “Almost,” he says.

Now we move to a piece of published literature, something we can read together and respond to. When they write, I tell them, they're part of a great tradition. Their stream joins the river.

Today I've brought “Love in the Time of Chain-Link Fences,” a poem by Reginald Dwayne Betts, who spent eight years in prison beginning when he was sixteen—including fourteen months in solitary confinement. There, he discovered poetry and found his vocation. “In a poem,” he says, “you can give somebody a whole world.”

This poem is about visitation day at prison. It begins:

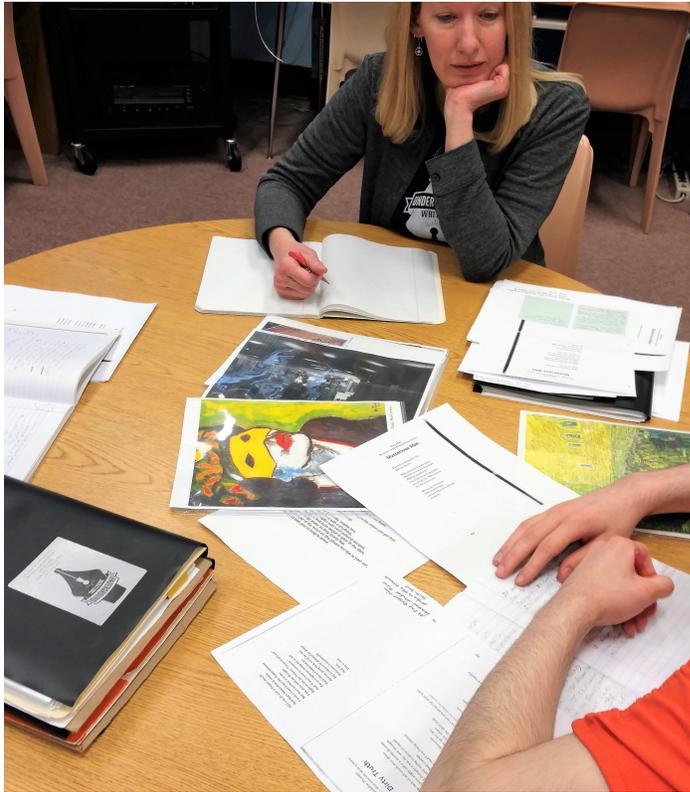
Released June 2019



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*I watched. There was a chain-link fence, a
tear falling from her face. The echo of a car
door slamming . . .*



[A. Muia with a student in Juvenile Detention]

We talk about visitation days. “It really affects your emotions, especially after,” one student says. Others nod. “It’s hard because you can’t hug them,” someone adds. “No contact.”

We read the poem again, noting the objects: fence, car, sun, letters, chains. I ask what things someone would see here, in juvenile visitation. They mention the heavy steel door. The barely working phone. The plastic chairs, the cameras, and the glass. I invite them to write their own poem about visitation.

They write:

I noticed it right when I seen it.

It looked familiar,

that anger with sadness in his eyes.

I felt the same way when I seen my older brother in an orange

suit

*through a glass window surrounded by tan bricks
and red slamming doors.*

*I felt like the world was coming down on me
when I read his eyes.*

Walking through the red heavy steel doors.

*You see your mother on the other side of the glass bulletproof
window.*

Picking up the phone, looking into her glossy eyes.

She's trying not to cry, but she can't hold it in and breaks down.

Telling her I love her and miss her ends up making her cry more.

No hugs

No contact with your own mother.

20 minutes are up and it's time to say goodbye.

Hard to see your mother cry.

Years is on my mind

Tears come to my eyes

*I talked to him from the other side of the glass
on a barely working phone.*

He hates the decisions I make

because I get locked up and he's alone.

He starts to cry and I tell him it's alright

*but he tells me he can barely sleep at night because he's scared
of losing me.*

But I try to comfort him with something amusing.

At the end of our workshop, we end with a "brain fill." It's a time to reflect on something we learned or experienced through our own writing. They write:

Writing makes me drop my feelings and thoughts on paper. A way to relieve stress and look back to your past. A way to write down what you can change and what to do for a better future. A way to express your feelings to others, or make the reader

picture a picture in their mind.

Before I was booked I didn't like reading. Really I never even picked up a book. I don't know, probably felt cool for that. But since I been in here, it's like all I want to do is read.

Really been liking how my writing is been turning out. I feel like it's a gift I been given that I'm starting to notice.

OTHER NEWS & UPDATES



When the Dust Rises is a collaborative project of the Mount Vernon Migrant Leaders Club and Underground Writing. The book is comprised of 250 pages of student writing, art, photography, and afterword/resource material. The book's foreword is written by two-time U.S. Poet Laureate, Juan Felipe Herrera. On Thursday, June 13, 2019, we had a great turnout at the Mount Vernon City Library for the **When the Dust Rises** book launch. Nearly 100 people showed up, including many students. Three students introduced the event, and Janice Blackmore (Club Coordinator and Migrant Graduation Specialist) added a number of notes and *Thank You*s regarding the collaboration between the Mount Vernon Migrant Leaders Club and Underground Writing. At the center of it all, 10-15 students gave powerful and emotional readings. It was a meaningful evening of community connections. 72 books sold. By the end of the day Friday—between the book launch and mailings—the first print run was nearly sold out. A second printing is currently under way, and there are still a handful of

copies available for immediate order:

<https://undergroundwriting.org>



The Underground Writing Podcast—featuring student writing and program updates—is on summer break until mid-August 2019. So, now's a great time to catch up on Episodes 1-29. Also, consider checking out **KITE**, our new serial within the podcast stream. **KITE** is an audio zine that follows a simple format: 8-12 pieces of student writing read aloud with silence or a note or two of music between each piece. Both of these are available for download from your preferred podcast provider, or online here: <https://undergroundwriting.org/podcast>



[*Skagit County Juvenile Detention site*]

Underground Writing is a literature-based creative writing program serving migrant, incarcerated, recovery, and other at-risk communities in northern Washington through literacy

and personal transformation. Underground Writing facilitates generative readings of literature spanning the tradition—from ancient texts to those written in our workshops. Honoring the transforming power of the word, we believe that attentive reading leads to attentive writing, and that attentive writing has the power to assist in the restoration of communities, the imagination, and individual lives.

Our newsletter is published every other month, along with special editions and updates throughout the year. For 2019, we'll be sharing stories/essays written by our faculty of Teaching Writers, featuring our various workshop sites in Skagit Valley, Washington.

Underground Writing sites:

Skagit County Juvenile Detention (Youth)

Mount Vernon Migrant Leaders Club

(Youth - Mount Vernon School District)

Skagit Valley Recovery Community (Adults)

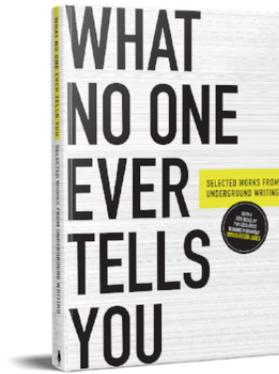
YMCA Oasis Daylight Center (Youth)

Skagit County Community Justice Center (Adults)

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