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A TRIPLE VISITATION CREATIVE WRITING WORKSHOP

by
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Just beyond the labyrinth of maximum-security gates, vacuum-locked protective doors and fortified walls, lies an eager group of prison scribes on Facility-A. They are waiting for the monthly writers' workshop.

As with any visit from the outside, be it friends, family, volunteer instructors or even clergy, visitors break the mind-numbing monotony of confinement, bring fresh perspective and provide the necessary mental break from the psychological torture of civil death.

The buzz of the "pedestrian gates arouses the small crowd of 17 writers. Thirty-four anxious eyes peer and strain to see down the black-top walkway, hoping for the triplet of VIPs coming to see them.

The two ladies, Alice Baylock and Christina Hoag sport nice turquoise outfits, as if creating their own uniform color scheme to contrast the sea of blue inmates and forest green guards. Chris Lynch, clad in black jeans and a black T-shirt, looks every bit of a cop, an undercover cop, with his shades and indubious look of authority.

Like a blue wave, the expectant writers amble over to the center pedestrian gate to be processed through and permitted into the classroom. Once inside the warmth of the class, the dark ambience of prison all but evaporates. A picture of a red and brown kindergarten-colored horse meets the eyes on the front center wall. Science posters dot the lining of the ceiling consuming most of the wall to the right. A successive row of large plexi-glass panes make up the wall to the left, for constant and direct supervision by custody staff, one of many reminders that this is a controlled setting.

The inside doesn't provide much respite from the intense July heat of Lancaster, about 90 minutes east of Los Angeles. Ms. Baylock waves a yellow folder to cool the stuffy air that circulates throughout the room. Her brown curly hair dances with each gust the folder commands.

Lynch, author of the novel *Blue-eyed Jack*, scribbles the day's agenda on the white board as Hoag's tropical-green eyes and warm small hands greet us as we file into the class. The pulse of music next door, as the band, Men Utilizing Sound to Incorporate Collaboration, intrudes our tranquility, making Hoag's soft voice much too soft to hear.

Lynch proudly shares his newest experimental script, "Big Foot vs. Chupacabra," while Hoag shares her enjoyment of being nominated for a writer's award for her non-fiction hit, *Skin of Tattoos*.

"Okay, let's do our readings. Who'll go first?" Lynch inquires. Damon Mathews volunteers. Damon meanders his long legs through the student desks into the front of the class where his brown, chip-monked cheeks spread into a bright smile. He reads. The class strains to hear him as the beat of heavy metal smothers his voice. Lester Polk, sitting near the front, motions with his right hand to speak up.

The succession of readers are tasked with sharing who they most honor in life and why. (Fathers seemed to be the serendipitous motif.) The shy ones almost always go last, but reading aloud is good practice for those who lack the experience. Nevertheless, writers, readers and speakers are being produced for the world at large.

It didn't take long for the weeds who began in the class less than a year ago, to bloom into fruitful plants. Growth is a process, and every process needs a medium. This triple visitation serves this vital purpose of educating, edifying and otherwise reforming minds that were once warped and crooked.

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