



2021
NaNoWriMo
Prison
Writing
Program
Zine

LOVE LAY DORMANT



INTRODUCTION

Last November, fifteen incarcerated writers in PEN America’s Prison Writing Program took on a daunting challenge: to finish a novel in one month. National Novel Writing Month, or NaNoWriMo, calls on writers each year to write 50,000 words in 30 days. To complete this ambitious word count on time, participants must face the fear of failure that prevents so many writers from even starting in the first place. In the end, the challenge means more than writing a novel. By emphasizing the daily ritual of putting pen to paper, NaNoWriMo pushes writers to confront their self-doubt and perfectionism in order to cultivate a healthy writing routine.

Perhaps the most crucial way that NaNoWriMo supports writers is through the community that it fosters. Participants all around the world connect on online forums and in-person write-ins to help each other complete the, at times grueling, daily word counts. In PEN America’s third collaboration with NaNoWriMo last November, incarcerated writers formed writing pods within their facilities, invaluable creative spaces where they could feel supported throughout the challenge. Each participant was also connected to a volunteer mentor to exchange correspondence throughout the month. These partnerships were ones of literary peers, both participants and mentors sharing in a reciprocal flow of ideas and encouragement. Through these writing groups and mentorships, the writers of the 2021 NaNoWriMo Prison Writing Program built a support network and created the companionship essential to making their art.

The aim of our *Love Lay Dormant* zine is to bring together and commemorate that art. Though they have been around since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, zines—short for “magazines”—became most commonly associated with the do-it-yourself and punk

aesthetic sensibilities of the late 1970s and 1980s. Easy and affordable to make—often held together with tape, run off a photocopier and assembled by hand—zines have always been an accessible grassroots method for artists, musicians, and writers to share their work with peers and collaborators—without waiting for the fickle approval of gatekeepers. We embrace the fresh and rebellious essence of the genre in assembling this zine, a collection of beautiful writing that blossomed despite the difficulties of the NaNoWriMo challenge and, of course, the constraints of daily life in prison. Consider this publication a celebration of each other, and a tribute to what writers can create together as a community.

What follows is a series of excerpts from various of the writers' novels in progress, as well as pieces by mentors that were written outside of NaNoWriMo. From epic fantasy quests to ghost stories to murder mystery, reflections on prison, and messages of hope and home, these excerpts constitute only a fraction of what our participants produced, but they speak volumes on the sheer brilliance of what these writers accomplished within that month. Each writer was also invited to respond to a question of their choice about their experience with NaNoWriMo, their creative process, or any advice they had for readers. You can read these reflections at the end of each excerpt.

Thank you to all the contributors to this zine for sharing their exciting stories and powerful words. I hope this collection of work preserves the memory and reward of the experience, and that it inspires others to take on the challenge of writing a novel in a month themselves.

In solidarity,

Sophia Ramirez

2021-2022 PEN America Post-Grad Fellow

**This zine was made with the support of the PEN America
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For more than four decades, PEN America's Prison Writing Program has amplified the writing of thousands of imprisoned writers by providing free resources, skilled mentors, and audiences for their writing. To learn more about our offerings, write to us at prisonwriting@pen.org

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WILLIAM DANIELS

Even though Nil had freed the children from that accursed hut, and had destroyed the abomination, he knew that the children had literally grown up within those filthy, stifling, smothering walls.

A lifetime of memories is not so easily shaken off. Bad memories, especially, cling and chill like a threadbare cloak.

Nil understood this more so than most.

The childrens' stunted vocabulary and total lack of any social interactions beyond those cultivated amongst themselves within that hut where they had been imprisoned only made explaining concepts such as "TRIBE," "FAMILY," and especially... "HOME" all the more difficult.

How do you explain "WANTED" to children that had been raised to be sacrificed from their birth?

Their earliest and every other memory was of beatings, subjugation, hunger, and seperateness.

How do you teach such children that life should mean MORE?

What words can you impart to help them understand the immeasurable worth of their OWN lives?

Nil's own childhood memories helped him.

He described growing up in his Foster mother A'nna's house.

He tried to put into words the taste of blueberry sweet treats, the smell of fresh brewed coffee, the feel of A'nna's

caring arms around him when it felt like the Tribe, and the whole of Mheen-de'a didn't want him.

Nil let his heart guide his words.

"Home is a special place. You can always come back there, and be safe. You are always welcome there, and wanted, no matter how far away you go, or for how long," Nil explained. "Huts, caves, and Havens can all be torn down or abandoned. Home goes with you everywhere that you go. Home begins inside of your heart. As long as your heart beats, as long as the hearts of the FAMILY beat, HOME endures.

The night had been long, but seeing the light of understanding—and perhaps even HOPE—within the childrens' eyes, Nil counted every second of it as worth the work.

The childrens had a HOME now, and always would, for at least as long as his own heart beat.

Question & Answer

Can you describe your writing process?

I write in a Non-Linear form, so outlining is crucial. Chapter numbers don't matter. My writing is driven by emotion. I allow my characters to lead with their hearts, and just transcribe the truths of my own heart that they reveal to me along the way.

DEREK TRUMBO

Years ago, I figured out that if I wanted to maintain my sanity in this horrible place, I would need to find myself a hobby. The problem with that line of thinking was I knew it would take something more than drawing, painting, or learning how to play guitar to hold my attention. I actually got fairly decent at the first two, but could never afford to buy myself a guitar. One of my many secret ambitions still is to learn how to play a guitar, but for now it will have to remain an ambition that I can't pursue.

As far as hobbies go, I tried my hand at woodwork arts and crafts, and found that I liked it. I made all sorts of boxes and designs and stuff, and wound up selling nearly all of it. I just didn't see much point in building things out of wood I'd never send to the people in my life that I wish I could. What was the point?

I tried chess, and realized that although I was halfway good at it and could win a few games, I didn't much care for the arrogance of the guys I'd had to choose from to play against. I didn't much care for the assholes who played chess, and mostly no one else did either. Scrabble players in here were mostly shit-talking egotists who'd memorized the Scrabble dictionary in order to make themselves look like they actually had a vocabulary. Uno wasn't even on my radar. I couldn't allow myself to become the guy who collected pictures of women in bathing suits or had massive photo albums filled with the smiling faces of celebrities I'd never meet. No, that wasn't a pastime I wished to pursue.

So, I turned to writing in order to find my catharsis. I sought my humanity through the conjuring of words like alchemy. The magic of turning a blank page of paper into an extension of the images in my thoughts. But most people have expressed to me that they can't find what I've found in writing. The same way that I couldn't find pleasure in card games or athletics. Everyone is different. That's what makes life beautiful.

Even in prison.

Question & Answer

What advice do you have for incoming NaNoWriMo participants?

In prison there are very few opportunities for one to better themselves, with the constant uproar of prison life and all of the obstacles of being imprisoned. These guys accept the challenge because they have stories to tell or things they wish to prove to themselves. But that's only why they accept the challenge. The reason why they *complete* the challenge is because of the support PEN and NaNoWriMo shows, and the knowledge that they are not alone. Some of these guys have 6th grade educations, learning disabilities and life sentences, but still they have a tale to tell.

Why should you accept? Because your story matters. Everyone's story matters.

CLINTON CHEEK

Yothain: You have no idea what is ahead for you. The dangers you'll face will test you in ways you can't conceive of in your mind right now. Heed my warning: don't take this lightly. The fate of the world is in your hands. We're all counting on you.

Araven: Finding some really old ball in a cave that needs to be shattered seems like a breeze after slaying a dragon. All due respect, but we have been in much worse situations and come back fine every time. I think we'll be back before anyone can even notice we were gone.

Yothain: This will be no simple stroll through the woods. Maybe your brother will be able to impress upon you the extreme seriousness of this quest you are going on. You won't just face a few goblins and be done in time for dinner. You very well might meet your end.

Araven: Oh come on. It's not like some big huge monster is hanging out in a cave guarding some stupid old forgotten relic just for kicks.

Kalless: I love you brother, but this isn't just some relic. It's an artifact that is also in fact an actual piece of the evil god Nilagrist. As Yothain said, it is very likely that it has drawn all manner of twisted creatures and cruel monstrous things. The things hidden there will be sneaky and stealthy—many of them will know we are there long before we will see them. Every step can be our last before being eaten alive, or worse. This won't be one of your famous storm-the-gates or full frontal assault campaigns that lead to more glory, riches, and an increasingly self inflated ego. This could end in

death. Or maybe death would be a luckier outcome. You'll have to actually use your head and even use some forethought to come up with a plan at times, not just rush in all gung ho.

Araven: Well damn, you two suck all the fun out of the room.

Question & Answer

How do you navigate writing with the obstacles of prison?

My process for writing from prison wasn't an obstacle. It was an escape that provided a way to get outside the walls and fences and be in a world of my own creation. I believe this experience is only going to further my writing efforts and lead to more positive thought processes in the future.

I'm glad that I got to take part in NaNoWriMo and believe I will again next year. Thank you.

Carol sat staring at the letter Amelia had mailed to the prison that she had smuggled out. She was still trying to fathom what kind of love lay dormant for twelve years and then awakened again with an anniversary date and a memory of someone looking at you in a way that no one had since. A look that made you feel like you were the most special person in the whole universe. A look like her parents had shared and that had filled her mother with enough love to last a lifetime, even without her father there.

She thought back over the journal entries she had read. She really felt like she was getting to know Allen English now, though she still couldn't reconcile his past secret life that put him in prison to the one he shared with Amelia.

A thought kept coming to her mind that she tried to suppress, but was as persistent as a hungry baby on its mother's breast. It would be an awful thing to have to do but... why not write to her? She could tell her about Allen. Maybe they'd hit it off. They could have a lot in common if she was still the Amelia of Allen's journals. Of course, there was no indication she was attracted to women in anything she had read, other than one friend which may have just been a bi-curious moment or just needing some affection without the complications of a relationship.

"What if...?" Lana tapped her lips with a finger, speaking aloud.

"No... she'd know." Lana's internal dueling voices took sides.

"He's a dead convict. He's not going to mind. There's no one to find out."

"You're not seriously considering this, are you?"

"She's halfway across the state. There's no way you'd ever even meet." Lana scrubbed her face with her hands.

She knew it was the lonely, desperate, afraid-to-put-herself-out-there self who was winning the debate.

"I think they call this a catfish, but I feel like a snake already."

With her mind made up, she grabbed pen and paper and Allen's journal. That feeling that someone was in the room came over her again so strongly she looked around to see if anyone had come in. Her eyes were drawn to Allen's art portfolio on her dresser.

She pushed the feeling aside and began to write:

Dear Amelia,

Question & Answer

What has NaNoWriMo meant for you? Why did you decide to engage in it?

I found throughout my career that I work best with a tight deadline to get a job done. Something about the pressure of time got my productive energy flowing.

Now that I'm actually doing time, NaNoWriMo has provided that good pressure and re-energized my creative flow into the art of writing.

JUSTIN FUTRELL

David: So who do you think did it?

Tom: Honestly, I thought you did. The way you have been acting is erratic, and you have been kind of a hothead all day.

David: Ha, how could I be the killer? I have no motive. I thought it was you when Knight started throwing all those situations out there. He made some pretty good points though—I thought he was gonna have an aneurysm when Carter told him he couldn't come in.

Tom: Yeah that was pretty funny. What about that vein on the side of his head throbbing when Carter showed him he was recording the conversation? I thought he was gonna have a heart attack.

David: Yeah, Carter is super smart. He thinks quick on his feet. Hell, he could even get away with— (Pause)

Tom: With what?

David: Nothing, never mind. Forget I ever said anything.

Tom: Oh, okay, I'm gonna watch this movie until Carter comes back.

(Tom walks to the couch, in mid stride he freezes. David approaches the audience.)

David: Could my best friend of twenty years be a murderer? It does not seem possible. I have known him all his life, and, sure, he has a temper, yeah, but murder? I mean, yeah they say that anything is possible, but, I mean, come on. If my

best friend was a cold-blooded killer, I would know, wouldn't I? I should know and yet I don't. Why?

Question & Answer

What advice do you have for incoming NaNoWriMo participants?

I had to sacrifice a lot while doing NaNoWriMo. My facilitator gave me the confidence I needed to finish my full length play. You need to have confidence if you want to attempt this challenge. You need to have the will to finish. The drive, the passion, all of this you will need.

MATTHEW TIPTON

"Thorfinn? That's an interesting name, how did you come across it?" Emund helped her to her feet. His curiosity had been peaked, and yet he was troubled at the same time as he helped stabilize her shaky legs.

Once given the opportunity, she launched into her tale, explaining about her mysterious dream world and the figure she believed to be Prince Hikaru Genji from the tales she was told as a child. Instead, it turned out to be a man named Thorfinn, standing in front of a massive tree named Yggdrasill.

Her tale was woven in such a way that Emund paled as she continued. Never before had he named the world tree around her, and yet she pulled it out of thin air. Thorfinn, while not an uncommon name, was still not too common compared to others—Yggdrasill, on the other hand, brought a fear in him from deep within. Who could have told her? Maybe he murmured it in his sleep once, and she figured it out—yes, that had to be the reason. She was just an unfortunate little Japanese girl caught in a slaver's web. He was the only Norseman she'd ever met, so he had to have let it slip before. But even trying to explain it away only made him more nervous and unsure.

What has NaNoWriMo meant for you? Why did you decide to engage in it?

I needed structure for my writing. I needed guidance and the companionship that came with it. I was writing alone before and basically writing fan-fiction. Now after three years of NaNoWriMo, I want to take my writing to the public, to entertain the masses with original pieces.

KADARON SLEDGE

Fishers Of Men: Chapter One

Excalibur Jones sinks to his knees inside his condominium window, his favorite ninja-black, iShare digital camera periscope-ing outward over its ledge, lens purring in autofocus. A four year old incandescent bulb glows inside his back bedroom. It is the only lighting in the condo. Excalibur is careful. When taking sneaky photos, it is best to be sneaky.

His home-game, South Carolina, Gamecocks b-ball shorts do not protect his knees from a booby trap of red, blue, yellow, green, and orange neon pony beads which eat into his fat-free kneecaps. I will kill that girl, he thinks of his daughter Ya'vee. It had to be her. Ever since streaming the Home Alone trilogy on Hulu... His other girls only leave melted Play Doh cookies in their microwave, decorate his OLED TV screen with ice cream-scented Mr. Sketch washable marker rainbows (the place still smells like Baskin Robbins), or put glitter in his mixed-breed hair. His seventy-seven dollar remote rests Bedazzled upon an arm of his burgundy, 1986, curved Carson sectional sofa, which his spoiled girls have learned not to alter—intentional or accidental. A man's gotta have his throne... especially in his bachelor pad.

No time to adjust. Senator Taddrick David Prim slides his red-with-yellow-racing stripes 1996 Dodge Viper RT/10 into valet parking. Tad waited until 2016 to purchase the '96. He could easily have afforded it a decade back, but there was more political advantage in saying, "I've had to save up for my dreams, just as The People whom I serve."

Snap. Snap. Snapshot. Senator Prim comes about—now between vehicle and Excalibur—and helps his passenger get out. Powerful AC acts like frosting on the window. Excalibur’s first view of her is her sap green, mid-thigh, stewardess skirt, then a looong, lovely mocha leg, an intimate shadow, a hip scoot, then a revelation: she is hairless. Cha—Ching! The Big Kids Beads Assortment digging into his knees forgotten, lust triggers Excalibur’s sex addiction—rapid fire photos, promising himself, “Strictly for the job.” Remembering, almost too late, to get some facial shots of her. She could have been headless, for all he cared.

Question & Answer

Any advice for people considering trying NaNoWriMo?

Do it. The simple workbook they give you is outstanding. But free advice and feedback from a mentor are the most valuable things this industry can ever give.

DAVID MITCHELL

Rachael sat bolt upright. The cacophony of sound pounding around her made her run to the window and fling back the curtain, to find white hot chain lightning racing across the sky. Rain poured down in wavering sheets that appeared to billow like a shower curtain does with the bathroom window open on a breezy day.

As her heart rate settled back to normal, Rachael remembered the sheet metal roof and realized that it must be amplifying the pounding of the storm. Knowing she wouldn't be able to get back to sleep, she decided that coffee, with a little help from the bottle of royalty, would help settle her nerves. She grabbed the bottle of Crown and walked out in the hall.

On her way to the kitchen she stopped, certain that another pair of footsteps followed along with her own. Spinning quickly, she saw nothing but black, empty hallway where she was sure she would be confronting... someone. Chalking it up to strange sounds in an unfamiliar house, Rachael continued on into the kitchen. She flipped the light switch and was confronted with nothing more ominous than the gleaming white and silver surfaces that she had seen before.

While the coffee brewed, she took a pull straight from the bottle. The self loathing that accompanied the warmth spreading throughout her body made her want another. She knew that she had a problem with hiding behind drugs and alcohol. It had started as a social escape and morphed in college to a daily habit. Pushing the negative thoughts from

her mind, she poured a stiff shot into a coffee mug and topped it off with the dark, heady aroma of Community Coffee with chicory she had found yesterday in the cabinet. When she opened the cabinet door to put the coffee back, staring out at her were a pair of yellow eyes. Rachael screamed loud enough to wake the dead, and as she backpedaled the cat leaped out, claws extended. With the screech of an old rusted barn hinge followed by a hiss, the cat landed halfway between the cabinet it had jumped from and where Rachael had come to rest seated on the floor, her back against the wall. Her heart slammed in her chest and cold sweat broke out in a sheen. The cat had been solid black with yellow eyes which seemed to glow like those of a Jack-o-Lantern on Halloween night. Its coat shone as it passed her line of sight, and with a swish of its tail it looked back at Rachael disdainfully and was gone.

Question & Answer

What has NaNoWriMo meant for you?

I regret to say that I didn't get a novel completed in a month. However, I got two started, and I had fun doing it. I appreciate my mentor's help and encouragement throughout this process.

ALEX JONES

Gemma, Alistair, and I paddled through the city—my first time traversing its waters with them. I finally agreed to join in on their regular ocean outings a few months ago after telling my roommate Cora to leave. Cora was the one who convinced me to move closer to the city, for no reason other than its novelty.

I loved my home in the wilderness. But I also loved her, and still believed she would open her eyes one day and realize she wanted me too. She didn't know that though, so I lied: "Yeah, I guess it would be cool to be close to the ocean."

Coastal metropolises were no longer glittering hubs of sophistication and glamour, but drowned vestiges of materialistic mania. Scrappers helped themselves to the buffet of cold leftovers, taking anything their small vessels could carry. Everything was done at the explorer's own risk, and, for many, the wealth of materials was worth it. City life never died though—it just moved a safe distance from the shoreline. I knew from my mom that many things stayed the same: bars, restaurants, things to buy, people to impress. The difference was that many people now pursued the invisible more fervently than the visible.

The city always made me think of my mom. I hadn't seen her since I was 13, when she sent me to live with her brother George while she went into treatment for cancer. She didn't tell me she had cancer, but that it was so George could teach me woodworking.

"George doesn't have any kids, and it would be a shame if he never had the chance to pass on what he knows."

“He should teach a class then.”

“Rocelyn. You’re his niece, he wants to teach you. Wouldn’t it be fun to spend time away from home?”

“No. I love our home.”

It had always been just us two, with the rest of the world at the periphery.

Question & Answer

Can you describe your writing process during the month of November?

I don't do well with routine or rigid expectations, but this can be a set up for procrastination. To combat this, I told myself that every time I had the thought, "Should I write now?" I would do it without a second thought. This happened at least 3 times a day, so it worked out well.

REBECCA E.

Of when my father had polio, I've heard disjointed details but no narrative. Scalding baths, quarantine, how many adults held him down for the spinal tap, the iron lung, paralysis that one day disappeared.

In the world outside, my grandmother lengthened his Hebrew name with Chaim, Life, and my grandfather delivered bread through the night. Under the covers, his sister plucked the braces from her teeth with scissors.

Each time visiting hours ended, my grandparents stood outside the hospital staring up at a window.

Polio came to him in 1954. The vaccine came to him in 1955.

We've spoken of 2020 itself as a golem. We've started posting pictures of injections or envious responses to others' pictures of injections.

No social media archive exists indicating whether my grandparents dreamt of a vaccine/knew it was coming/raged it had come belatedly for their kid/had never felt such relief when it came, even when they thought they could feel no more relief than three of them leaving the hospital, six legs walking.

There's one photograph of the bicycle bought for him after, with pooled money, and in it my father is blurry with motion.

We've let words into our hourly vocabulary: quarantine, distancing, strains, herd, cases. Daily math problems so vast

we can't see each individual number. We've said/meant we, but we've been mostly wrong.

Both of my parents remember waiting their turn at school for the shot. When I ask them for memories of receiving the vaccine, that's the only one: standing in line.

My mother tells me I had the Sabin oral vaccine – drops on my tongue – rather than the Salk injection. She tells me to Google, just for curiosity's sake, the sugar cube version. My mind conjures an image of children not chewing or sucking but letting the cube slowly, slowly dissolve. Thinking of it, I can feel it. A year of sheltering has been something like this: mouth, tongue, et cetera, holding still but activating in anticipation of the sweet.

We've reached for metaphors.

Salivating sounds bestial, carnal, silly. I mean more like a waiting that demands all focus. I mean more like a wanting that can't be helped.

Question & Answer

What has NaNoWriMo meant for you? Why did you decide to engage in it/in mentoring?

NaNo helps me let go of my perfectionism to get words on the page. It also helps me make progress on my book without having everything figured out, which is essential for novel writing.

MARY SULLIVAN

Fool to Cry

I fly past Will. Can't wait today,
even though he lives on the seventh floor
of our building.
He's with his sophomore friends
and I'm only in ninth.
Anyway, I love shooting up in the elevator.
Mom used to say, "Ceti, you're not a falling star,
you're a shooting star. Remember that."
No one's in the hallway
so I boot my ball down the old brown carpet,
do a fake around the defender,
roll back,
and score!

Score again—Mom's home and Foxface isn't.
But she's not moving.
I run to her,
put my head on her chest
to hear her heart
beating.
A half-eaten Dunkin' Donut with sprinkles
rises slowly up
and down
on her gray T-shirt.
"Mom, are you good?"

She looks up with glazed eyes
and smiles.

“Sorry, Ceti babe, I forgot
to go to the store today.”
Her eyes are like the rain
streaming down our windows,
and she’s the glass.
I don’t want her to break.

“It’s okay, I can get something to eat.”

In the kitchen,
I’ll find a spoon in the sink,
a ball of tin foil and a needle in the trash.

Question & Answer

What has it been like to work with a mentee throughout the challenge?

It's like filling my cup! My mentee's voice is so original and fresh—it's exciting (especially after teaching creative writing workshops where writing can feel manufactured in a way). THRILLING.

William Daniels

Derek Trumbo

Clinton Cheek

J.A.M

Justin Futrell

Matthew Tipton

Kadaron Sledge

David Mitchell

Alex Jones

Rebecca E.

Mary Sullivan

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