

How Nature Taught Me to Sing in Lockup (published in *Rain Shadow Review*, 2016)

Prison is a wild place.

I discovered an affection for nature in childhood and pursued it through college. But it was in prison where I learned to be a naturalist. Prison narrowed my education to a more intimate study. I understood that while nature has no restrictions, I had many, so I focused on seeing nature within my limitations. I became uncivilized in a manipulated landscape that warned me to be unobtrusive and quiet, yet alert. To notice things. Like the impenitent weeds, the trespasses of birds and insects. Like the night owls that violated the perimeter fences to feed on the mice and remind me of a world still untamed and mysterious. And the ants: those sexless worker drones that crawled about the prison grounds in hordes, carrying out menial jobs as masons and carpenters and waste-disposal crews, farmers and food-handlers. They obeyed without thinking, doing what they were told, sustaining a colony that existed only to devour and multiply. I couldn't escape the parallels.

In his essay, "The Case for Going Uncivilized," Barry Lopez says there are truly wild places that offer a kind of illumination that can take the darkness out of contemporary life, that help us regain "the sense of balance that the persistent closeness of strangers, the screech and mumble of machinery, and the needling presence of advertising threaten, every day, to overturn."

On every lap during my daily exercise walks, as I passed along the length of fence that enclosed my 20-acre world, my eyes always turned to the trees. They, like other bits of wildness confined or visiting there, touched some vital part of me. Those trees lessened the darkness of the place. They allowed me to see what was right in the world.

I watched one tree grow over the years from a transplanted stick into a humid, bug-clicking canopy of wrought-iron branches and hard green leaves despite successive seasons of mindless pruning. I would sit against its sun- and wind-furrowed trunk and breathe in the smell of its obstinacy. The mesquite was a survivor. It had overcome years of butchery yet remained robust. Most springs, it produced a crop of seedpods, which drooped in clusters like blonde dreadlocks;

some winters it even held onto its leaves. But the mesquite grew askew, hunching away from a nearby building as if crippled by the heaviness of its gray walls.

It taught me many lessons. I learned the difference between pruning something for its own good, following its natural form and inclinations, and pruning something with no more purpose in mind than retribution. This, I decided, was the difference between discipline and punishment: one looks forward and works toward restoration and health; the other looks backward and tears down, dehumanizes. Pruning should enhance, not maim. It was ironic how prison treated its plants and inmates in the same way.

The mesquite tree was the only one of its kind at the prison. It was alone but not withdrawn. Cicadas trilled among its branches. Fat carpenter bees carted off sacks of its pollen. Ground squirrels feasted on its sweet pods. The tree seemed obstinate only in the way that life is obstinate. Despite the buildings and fences that confined it, the concrete slabs beneath it, despite even the brutal punishment of its careless pruning, the mesquite emerged each spring with offerings of leaves and shade and seeds. This was what struck me: The tree didn't shrink from that place.

The writer Alison Deming says we need to outgrow the childish notion that nature takes place only in wilderness. Wendell Berry says that the whole world is wild, and “all the creatures are home-makers within it, practicing domesticity: mating, raising young, seeking food and comfort.” Anne Matthews, in her book, *Wild Nights: Nature Returns to the City*, writes that “Wild does not always mean natural; urban is not the same as tame. Even in Manhattan, you are never more than three feet from a spider.” In prison, the spiders share your pillow.

Prison shoved me toward a love for wildness. Along with the arachnids, I shared my pillow with writers like Deming and Berry and Lopez and many others whose words about the natural world exploded my confinement.

I saw how the visitations of toads, those golden-eyed miracles of summer, connected me to my three young daughters who were just beginning to discover their own love for nature. I found

lessons in the breakouts of weeds among the concrete and steel, in the spring intrusion of barn swallows that nested under the eaves of our cells.

I learned to gauge my life by the swallows. Their nature, like many things in the world, was cyclic; they lived inside the heartbeat of the land. Ebb and flow, flex and flux, rise and fall. It was a pattern I could live with, one that gave me hope. As long as the swallows came in the spring and went in the fall, came and went and came again, I could feel their rhythm, measuring it out as a change of seasons. This was the source of my hope: the swallows didn't make me feel the weight of time, they cued me to the passage of time. Where ancient peoples raised stones to track equinoxes and solstices, the swallows were my Stonehenge. In a place where clocks and calendars were meaningless, where hours and days and months percolated into one homogenous, stagnant pond, I marked the swallows.

If I could measure time by the migrations of swallows, and connect with my daughters through the wisdom of toads, anything was possible. I could learn about human passion in the exploits of spiders. I could feel the importance of trees. I could restore my faith in wildness with the single appearance of a great horned owl.

I had found an unlimited wildness in prison. And in this, as undeserved as it was, I found redemption in the fact that life is no accident. Life is universal. It is like a fifth state of matter.

From my upper bunk, a narrow window allowed me a view of the desert outside my cell. An expanse of razed ground, marked with a horizon of galvanized steel webbing, filled the lower two-thirds of the frame. But beyond the fence, an entire basin of creosote, mesquite, and cholla cactus leaned up against the hunched shoulders of the Santa Rita Mountains at our border with Mexico. On some evenings, coyotes called to me with borderless voices from the desert's fringe where nighthawks knit the sky with needled wings.

For twelve years, my wilderness was a limited geography bound by chain link and razor wire. My wilderness was a prison with its own nuances of seasonal change, summer droughts and winter freezes, rain, dust, and wind; with its own microcosm of wildness. Nature was there as

much as it is in any national park or forest or monument.

Most people probably think that prisoners wake up every morning as bodies on mattresses that move through pointless days, bodies at work raking rocks, bodies at meals, bodies in front of TV's, bodies that live without participating in life. This is true for some. But there are others who see beyond the concrete walls and scraped earth, or see into it, between the cracks, those who notice the stubborn untamed, feel its moods, hear its migrations, sense its shiftings and pulses. Those who sense nature not by accident but by paying attention. Serendipity, after all, is a matter of will. As Pagan Kennedy suggests in "How to Cultivate the Art of Serendipity" (*New York Times*, Jan. 2, 2016) those Persian princes from the Isle of Serendip weren't just lucky as much as they were keen observers. Did the finches of Galapagos find Darwin? Or was it his creativity that sought them out?

The human mind comprehends no boundary, no edge. It is a nerve-tangled pathway that wires us to wildness, a current that flows in both directions. Nature can access the hardest criminals, finding weaknesses and breaching barriers, building nests and rearing offspring. Place windows facing toward the migrations of birds and we will count them. Open cell doors to the toads and tarantulas and we will learn from them. Plant trees and we will sit under them. Even in the deepest prison holes where society's worst offenders are kept, we will attune ourselves to the proceedings of cockroaches. Nature returns us to that childhood place where we register astonishment at the very mundane until we become exhausted by the euphoria.

I spent most of my twelve-year sentence inside the chain-link fences at the Santa Rita Unit in Tucson, Arizona. The prison housed more than nine hundred men on four yards, cell blocks of ninety-six two-man cells, and one tent city of canvas, military leftovers. A half-mile dirt exercise track circled a field and a pocket oasis of trees, shrubs, and flower beds. The leaves and grass and blooms masked the stench of fear and desperation. They cut holes in the fences and broke open the stark, gray aspect of walls. This was not unusual. Like great art, nature's purpose is to disturb, to jar us out of our complacency in the world. Even if our world is a prison.

During my last years at Santa Rita, however, the climate changed. Nature became a

problem. The trees had grown too tall. Someone might climb one, hide among the branches, and imagine he's escaped. The shrubs had grown too lush. Someone might lie down and disappear into the leaves. Crews with chainsaws and backhoes worked feverishly to correct the security error: All the brittlebush and agave, the Texas ranger, all the Mexican bird of paradise, the desert willow had to go—cut down, chopped into sections, wrenched from the ground. The few trees that survived the clearing lacked all lower branches, their skinny trunks winding comically into high, tight crowns like trees in a Dr. Seuss story.

Imaging the Sonoran Desert without the saguaro. Without the mesquite and paloverde and drought-withered cholla cactus. Today, it's all gone. And the men remain locked inside their cells. No longer do they walk circles in soaking monsoon storms or rest on sun-glazed grass among poppies and mint. No longer do they sit at tables with mourning doves perched on their shoulders, these men who once knew the intrinsic value of nature lying against the skin, even if they were unaware of how profoundly it touched them.

Maybe it's farfetched to suggest that nature can teach anything of worth to prisoners. Prison already has such excellent role models. Those who have mastered the art of filling their days with narrowed options. But I would rather learn from nature than learn from prison. I would rather be a disciple of saguaros and centipedes. Nature cuts through more hard layers than punishment ever will, ever could. For me, nature reached to the place where hope lay, and hope was a better security system than all the guards and fences and electric locks. For twelve years hope was my jailer.

Cut off nature from anyone and you cut off hope—something more inhuman than taking away his freedom. I can't imagine doing time there now—without tasting wildness, without learning how to live from the twisted and obstinate. Prison taught me to be unobtrusive and quiet, to always go with the flow, to never make waves. Nature taught me that a wind without resistance has no voice. That a river without stones cannot sing.