

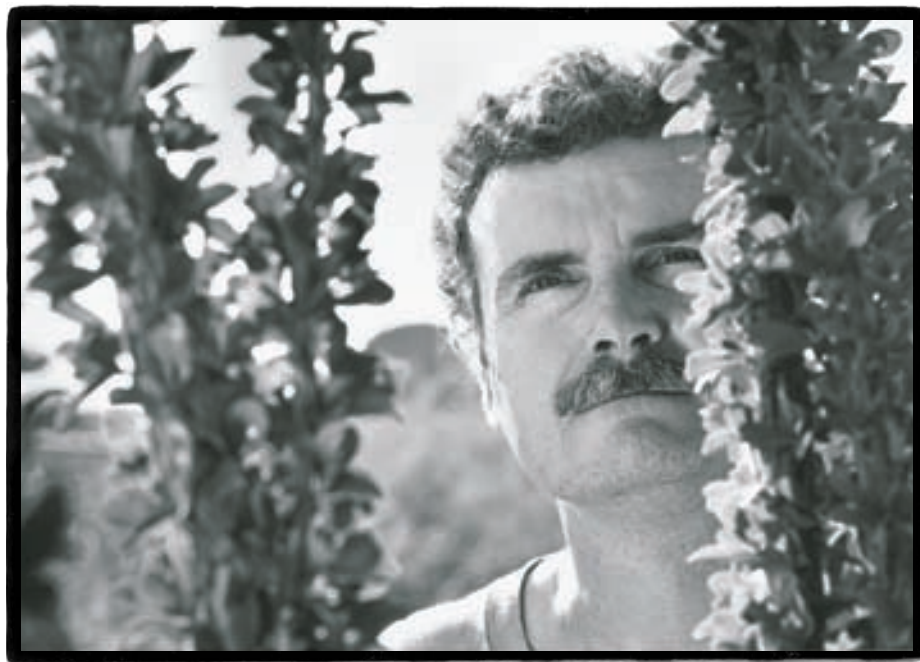
Law and Nature's Order

How swallows and saguaros gave a prisoner his freedom

Exit 269 on the dusty eastern fringe of Tucson, Arizona, is nondescript and easy to miss. It's the signs along I-10 for the state and federal prisons that get your attention. "Prison Row," as the road is informally known, is home to thousands of men serving time for petty theft, drug smuggling, sex offenses, bank robbery, murder, and myriad other crimes.

The Tucson Federal Correctional Institution consists of a series of low-slung concrete structures surrounded by towering chain-link fences and spirals of stainless-steel razor wire that glint in the desert sun. In the reception area, the faces of Attorney General John Ashcroft and President George W. Bush smile from large color photos. The linoleum floor has been polished to an unnatural sheen. Ken Lamberton, who spent 12 years just down the road in the Santa Rita Unit of the Arizona state prison, shows his ID, signs in, is stamped with invisible ink that will allow him to pass through interior checkpoints, and is virtually frisked by a metal-detecting wand. The drill is repeated on me. Guards, with keys clanking and radios crackling names and commands, then escort us to an antiseptic visiting room with plastic chairs, vending machines, and walls sporting flood lights and the American flag.

A few minutes later, 20 inmates—white, brown, and black—file in and shake our hands. They are part of a writing class and have been assigned Lamberton's book, *Wilderness and Razor Wire: A Naturalist's Observations From Prison*. Their teacher and my friend, poet Madeline Kiser, has asked us to conduct an interview in front of her students. I'm so nervous my palms are sweating, but the 43-year-old Lamberton seems even



"I started seeing prison as an abstraction," says Ken Lamberton. "What was real for me was nature."

more distraught. He hasn't been back to a prison since he was released in 2000, and because he was a sex offender he occupied the bottom rung in the convict hierarchy.

It had been a hard fall. In 1985, as a 27-year-old science teacher in Mesa, Arizona, Lamberton was given the district's Teacher of the Year award. He inspired his students with his love of biology. He couldn't pass roadkill without stopping and bringing it into class for the teachable moment. He could relate to his pupils on their level. But a few months after he was honored he flipped the coin of his fortune, abandoning his two young daughters and pregnant wife, Karen, to run off with a 14-year-old former student. The two were caught a few weeks later in a ski town in Col-

BY MARILYN BERLIN SNELL

orado. They had crossed state lines. Lamberton was convicted of child molestation and sentenced to 12 years.

After the room settles and the men take their seats, I ask Lamberton what had possessed him. He blames no one but himself. He knew right from wrong but didn't care. "Arrogance, selfishness, and stupidity led to my crime and my family's terrible anguish and humiliation," he says. "I had no boundaries."

Prison is about nothing if not boundaries: Cells are a monotony of confined space; all movement beyond those eight-by-ten enclosures is controlled; guard towers and looming fences act as the ultimate physical border. But it was while in prison, ironically, that Lamberton found a mature freedom—one that admits responsibility as well as rights. The natural world served as his guide.

In the inhumane environment of prison, Lamberton developed an eye for details outside—thistles growing in concrete seams, hawkmoths blown in on the wind, Sonoran Desert toads burrowed in the sandbox used by the children of prisoners—and an ear for what these details had to teach. "Sometimes it would only be a sound, or a patch of grass, but wildness helped me see the broader connections," he says. Soon he could zero in so intently that he no longer saw fences. "I'd just see the bird, though it was sitting on razor wire."

Lamberton's tender focus found expression in *Wilderness and Razor Wire*, which won the 2002 John Burroughs medal for distinguished nature writing and placed him in the company of past winners including Rachel Carson, Peter Matthiessen, and Barry Lopez. It also helped keep his family together while he was incarcerated.

Karen Lamberton is now a city planner, but at the time of her husband's arrest and the front-page coverage and public humiliation that ensued, she was a stay-at-home mother without a college education. Ken's imprisonment forced Karen and her children onto welfare. When I meet her for dinner in Tucson, she's wearing large-frame glasses, a colorful dress, and sensible shoes. She greets me with a no-nonsense handshake. After a few pleasantries, she declares that the Chinese have it right: When someone in that country is sentenced to prison for certain crimes, she says, his entire family is brought to stand with him in front of the judge. "At least they're honest about who's going to suffer."

In 1986, she began taking classes at the University of Arizona. Most unbelievably, she stuck by her husband. She even studied to become a paralegal so she could fight for his release. "I wanted to kill him but I had no plans for di-

vorce," Karen tells me over chips and salsa. "My entire family structure was very religious. No one ever got divorced. I had a distant aunt whose husband shot her, then killed himself, but they didn't get a divorce." She's laughing but I know better than to join in.

Karen Lamberton was at the university one day, signing up for a required writing class, when someone recognized her from newspaper photos and took her to meet Richard Shelton. A poet and professor, Shelton had been teaching creative writing in Arizona prisons since 1972. Karen was worried about her husband's mental health, so she urged him to get involved with Shelton's class. "I would take pictures and bring them to Ken so he could draw them," she tells me. "I brought trees, chaparral, anything—trying to keep his mind occupied. But Richard could give him acceptance, encouragement, and useful criticism. He didn't care about Ken's past."

When I visit his book-lined desert home, Shelton is wearing a faded Center for Biological Diversity T-shirt and is flanked by two huge dogs. "Ken came into my class writing sappy religious articles," he says in a

most unsentimental, even cranky, way. "I was aware of his background in biology so I encouraged him to write about what he knew."

When Lamberton and I first meet I ask him to take me hiking. The Bullock fire in the mountains above Tucson has been raging for days, raining pine ash and desiccation onto an already parched Sonoran plain. Yet as we stand at the trailhead he seems oblivious to the faintly acrid morning air, which by 10 A.M. has butted up against 100 degrees.

"I heard the season's first cicada last week," Lamberton announces. "That means the monsoons will start in six weeks, on the Fourth of July." I find his confident statement consummately optimistic given that Arizona is in the grip of a six-year drought, the worst in the state's recorded history. (I later learn he's right. The monsoons blessedly came only four days late, on July 8.)

The drought has turned things dusty. Even the usually waxy-green chaparral leaves have failed to a dull, crisp brown. Yet below the mesquite bosk that edges the bed of Cienagua Creek, water gurgles up and flows intermittently from a mostly underground stream. Swallows and swifts dart among cattails. Large puddles and then ponds appear like mirages, but they're real, wet, and abundant with life.

Lamberton, a little over six feet tall with curly brown hair



Barn Swallow

and an aquiline nose, crouches in the gravel and peers into the first body of water we come to. Given his rap sheet, his shyness and soft voice are at first disconcerting. He finds it easier to talk if we don't make eye contact so I'm glad for the triangulation presented by the reflecting pool, where we can see but are not looking at each other. The algae-rich water teems with tadpoles, elodea, and finger-size fish. "Hey, look at that," he says suddenly, pointing. "It's a leopard frog." I see a smallish brown amphibian with black spots (a threatened species, it turns out), so well blended with its habitat I would have missed it.

I ask if he's always been so good at knowing what he was looking at.

"I may have had a degree in biology, but I didn't know a whole lot about the nature of this area," he says. "It was in prison that I started paying more attention to the things around me, identifying them. I got some books and looked up some weeds, and the plants that grew on the yard. Then I started asking questions."

When the barn swallows arrived on the Santa Rita yard one spring, for example, Lamberton couldn't name them but wondered why they were suddenly nesting at the prison. "I didn't even know if these birds were new to Arizona, so I started doing some research." He developed a theory that excess wastewater flooding the prison yard was creating a wetlands habitat for the birds. (The units were overcrowded—2,100 men in a space designed for half that many—and the sewage-treatment system couldn't handle it.) He sat still. He observed, at one point noting that the pointy-winged swallows darted about like dark hands throwing gang signs. He let the birds teach him.

When his family visited, usually twice a week, he'd draft his daughters into detective work. They studied the natural world together. By focusing on the barn swallows, toads, tarantulas, and thistles, Lamberton found a way to



Lamberton with, from left, Jessica, Kasondra, Karen, and Melissa.

connect with his girls and indulge his lost love of teaching. (Jessica, his eldest daughter, won a merit scholarship to the U of A this year and is majoring in environmental sciences. Youngest daughter Melissa's eighth-grade science project, "Hydraulic Conductivity," focused on the permeability of desert soils. She entered it in a competition in Washington, D.C., last spring and won a trip to an astronomy institute in Hawaii. When middle sister Kasondra is asked about her scientific interests, she proudly reports that for the last three years, as a volunteer at the International Wildlife Museum in Tucson, she's been giving a lecture on Madagascar hissing cockroaches.)

"Nature helped me with my family," says Lamberton. "My daughters were young and there was not always a lot to talk about. When the swallows started nesting we studied and enjoyed them together." Holidays came and went. Lamberton remembers the Fourth of July in particular because the fireworks he could see from the yard were bursting right over his Tucson home. He knew his wife and children were looking at the same thing, celebrating without him. Years passed. He published a scientific article on his barn swallow theory in *Bird Watcher's Digest*.

"Even after that article came out," says Lamberton, "I knew there was

more to say." Around this time the appellate court released him, after eight years behind bars. The birds necessarily took a backseat to reconnecting with his family. He began a master of fine arts program, studying with Shelton in a university setting. After 19 months of freedom, however, the Arizona Supreme Court reversed the decision and sent Lamberton back to prison to finish his last four years. "When I was returned to Santa Rita, the swallows greeted me," he says. "I decided then that I was going to write about the nature I was finding in prison. First, I was going to figure out what these swallows meant to me."

As if on cue, a swallow zips by us, sideways and back and then between the cattails. "I came to the conclusion that the swallows were like a calendar for me," he continues. "Sometimes I could count as many as fifty on the razor wire, and I realized they were part of a cycle. Though they would leave each season, they would also return, and they taught me that time, even in prison, isn't static. It passes." Except for the buzzing of insects, there is silence for a while. Then he adds, "They helped me feel time and, when that happened, I started to think about why I was doing time."

He talks about his selfishness. "I felt that I could do no wrong," he tells me. "I had this attitude even as a child, but then it was toward nature." When Lamberton first moved to the desert at age ten, he says, he took pleasure in impaling whiptail lizards, or stoning songbirds with his slingshot.

When I later ask Richard Shelton about Lamberton's self-critique, he thinks for a minute. "Selfishness is a lack of something: It's a lack of consideration of others; a lack of awareness of the world around you," he replies. "In Ken's case, it isn't that he got rid of something bad but that he gained something he lacked—he found a way to make connections."

In *Wilderness and Razor Wire*, Lam-

berton writes, “It’s encouraging for me to see the men stop and take notice of wildness. It demonstrates their humanity, their connection to nature as an integral and essential part of life. This connection to nature may even be more essential than freedom.” I find this passage hard to believe. A connection with nature more important than freedom? I ask Lambertson what he means.



Fruiting Saguaro Cactus

“It’s the difference between existing and being alive,” he says passionately. “When I studied nature, I came to see myself more and more as a part of it. I found my place.”

“Is that a kind of freedom?” I ask.

“Yes,” he says, “it’s the kind that comes from being connected to something outside yourself.” He later expanded on the idea. “Men without souls simply exist, many of them in our penitentiaries, moving from one day to the next with nothing to look forward to but the next meal or sitcom. The frightening thing is that there are people existing like this who aren’t incarcerated. What kind of freedom is that? I’d rather be locked up with the cockroaches.”

In the prison visiting room, Diablo is slouching in the last row of chairs. He has dark skin and rich black hair, and a pointy beard just like the devil’s. Lambertson has been telling the students about the creative escape he found in studying the natural world inside the

prison yard. “Weren’t you just escaping reality?” Diablo asks, and then looks around him. His eyes scan the fluorescent overhead lights; thick, small, opaque windows; locks; uniforms; guards; confinement. “This is reality, inside here,” he says.

“I started seeing prison as an abstraction, with made-up rules that were then brutally enforced,” Lambertson counters. “What was real for me was nature.”

I ask Lambertson if there’s a connection between nature and a peaceable nature. “The focus on nature stilled my mind, so I’d say there’s a connection between nature and a peaceful mind. I felt this in myself and saw it in other men who took the opportunity to sit outside and observe the natural world, to be caught in a monsoon thunderstorm, to watch it sweep in and kick up dust, to smell the chaparral.”

Raymond, who has a military-style crew cut and sweet green eyes, raises his hand. He has a speech impediment and so it takes him a while, but finally he says, “I’m from Alaska. When I first got to this prison I saw only thorns and sharp things and thought everything just wanted to hurt me. After reading your book, I saw birds, frogs, ants; it was beautiful. It taught me that I don’t have to see only the bad in here, that nature can help.” I find out later that after Raymond read *Wilderness and Razor Wire* he announced to his writing class: “I wish someone had told me a long time ago that a book could change your life.”

Joseph is sitting near Diablo, and is obviously unmoved. He has an armful of mermaid tattoos and a long lanky body that drapes over his seat. “What were you in for?” he asks Lambertson, though every man in the room knows, including Joseph. His voice is flat.

Lambertson explains his crime, but Joseph isn’t finished.

“How did the inmates react?”

“It was tough,” says Lambertson, who is maintaining constant eye contact with his interrogator. “I got into trouble, got some ribs broken. Someone tore off the back of my ear.” There are more pointed questions about the crime, which Lambertson answers.

Diablo is enjoying the exchange and the tension that’s resulting, so I’m surprised when he raises his hand and wants to discuss Lambertson’s sketches, which appear alongside the essays in his book. “I find those drawings close to perfection,” says Diablo, who I later discover is illiterate. “As close as you get, in my opinion, to showing your suffering nature. I especially liked the saguaro cactus blossoms with the seeds spilling out. Some of the blossoms are empty because they’ve been eaten but one is still intact. It’s fascinating, extraordinary.”

Lambertson finally relaxes. “It’s during the hottest and driest time of the year that the saguaro actually start producing fruit,” he says. “For wildlife this is a boon, especially for white-winged and mourning doves. For me, it was also a metaphor for the drought of prison, and it made me think that even here I, too, could produce fruit.”

Raymond, following Diablo and defying the general air of cynicism in the room, adds, “You gave the cactus life. I loved that.”

Time runs out, but one of the prison officials in the room has an idea. She suggests that they bend protocol and walk the men back to their unit through a side yard that has been landscaped by inmates.

As we stand beneath a statuesque and spiky saguaro, Lambertson seizes the teachable moment. “These cacti are often a hundred years old before they start branching,” he says. The blossoms on this one’s lithe arms are a vibrant, sassy pink. We all look skyward—somewhat less smoky now that the Bullock fire, begun by a careless human, has finally been contained—and admire an aged desert dweller that has perfected its survival skills in this hostile environment. No one moves. It is peaceful—quiet now except for mourning doves cooing in a nearby mesquite. The inmates are transfixed.

And then we part, heading toward the possibility of freedom, each in our own way. ■

MARILYN BERLIN SNELL is Sierra’s writer/editor.