



## H O P E

is the thing with feathers

BURROWING OWLS HAVE TAKEN SANCTUARY ON THE GROUNDS OF A CALIFORNIA PRISON, PROVIDING INSPIRATION FOR THE WOMEN INSIDE.



ONCE A MONTH, I FACILITATE a meditation group at a women's prison in California. I leave my cell phone, cash and lipstick in the car — inside, they're contraband — and take with me only pens and paper. As I walk towards the prison, small ground-dwelling owls keep vigil at the entrances to their burrows. Long-legged, with huge yellow eyes, they watch me warily, and if I come too close, hop into their holes, heads bobbing up to keep me in view.

Inside, I'm escorted to the chapel, where inmates wait seated in a circle on the floor. I read a poem by Naomi Shihab Nye or Pablo Neruda, or some passage that speaks to the women's lives inside. We talk about forgiveness, finding compassion, staying present with difficulty. We talk about loss and devastation. Then we write, an endeavor akin to meditation in my experience: the practice of receiving the world by letting it inhabit and blow through you like a breeze.

The women in the meditation group are inside mostly for drug and immigration offenses. Many are wives and mothers. Their individual reasons for being in prison are usually unknown to me, though there have been notable exceptions. One former inmate was incarcerated for her role in the politically motivated crimes of the Black

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IN CALIFORNIA

5,919

Number of women imprisoned\*

8,526

Pairs of burrowing owls remaining

\*State of California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, [www.cdcr.ca.gov](http://www.cdcr.ca.gov)

THE PRESENCE OF THE OWLS AT THE PRISON IS ENCOURAGING ON MANY LEVELS AND IN MANY DIRECTIONS... FOR ME, AND FOR THE WOMEN INSIDE, THE OWLS AFFIRM THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WILDERNESS AND TRUE FREEDOM, WHICH DERIVES NOT FROM CIRCUMSTANCES BUT FROM ONE'S RESPONSE.



Liberation Army and Weather Underground. When I first started volunteering at the prison, this inmate was the respected elder in the weekly meditation group. She walked with a limp from a gunshot wound to her leg. She died in 2010, just a few weeks after she was paroled. Her irrepressible spirit was a lamp of hope for other inmates, and for me, too. She was elegant and charismatic, open-eyed, quietly but fiercely determined. She wore lipstick with her regulation khakis and wrote dazzling poems. She found a way to thrive in the most unlikely of places — prison — not unlike the burrowing owls outside.

On the prison grounds, there's a wild, winged kingdom in defiant contrast to the gray hardscape and razor wire: Canada geese, wild turkeys, herons and *Athene cunicularia hypugaea*, the western burrowing owl. Named for the Greek goddess Athena's fondness for owls, they stand sentry outside their burrows — the repurposed homes of other animals, most likely ground squirrels — often perched on one leg. They catch prey either on foot or in flight. If it's breeding season, there are likely young underground.

The burrowing owl used to exist in much greater numbers across North America. Though protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, its population has been steadily declining. It's endangered in Canada and threatened in Mexico. It's endangered in Minnesota, threatened in Colorado, and listed as a Species of Special Concern in nine states, including California, where I live. A 2007 survey conducted by the Institute of Bird Populations confirmed that the population has dropped steadily in recent decades, mostly due to urban sprawl.

The presence of the owls at the prison is encouraging on many levels and in many directions. For birders, it's a robust local population in a dwindling general population. For me, and for the women inside, the owls affirm the connection between wilderness and true freedom, which derives not from circumstances but from one's response. They evoke an inconvenient truth: there are far too few burrowing owls, and far too many prisons.

According to the Sentencing Project website, there

has been a 500% increase in the prison population, now at 2.2 million, in the past 30 years. The population of women in prison has grown at 1.5 times the rate of men since 1980.

The Institute of Bird Populations survey estimates the number of burrowing owl pairs in California to be 8,526, decreased from the 1993 estimate of 9,266.

What could be less wild than a prison? Still, the burrowing owls seem to be flourishing on this not particularly pretty patch of earth. They've adapted to the encroachments of 'civilization' and built environments by making their homes in the space available. What happens in the buildings behind the barbed wire is irrelevant to them. They don't distinguish between guards or inmates, innocent or guilty. They are free to come or go. They bring a spark of joy to many of the women living life in that institution, and the volunteers and prison employees who spot them, in part because they stand for hope and resilience in constraining circumstances. They offer the consolation of all wild things: the indomitable will to survive and thrive.

The owls want nothing to do with me, but that's no matter. It's their presence that matters. The same goes for the women inside during the time we spend together. I don't need to know what they did to find themselves in prison. I'm not a judge or a corrections officer. What is important to me is that they stay in contact with their humanity — that they don't forget what it is to be a human being or stop living their lives, even when the world they knew and loved seems to be disappearing. The owl needs a burrow for shelter. The inmate needs a quiet, still space in her heart for refuge.

Wilderness can't be squelched. It rejuvenates despite our disregard. The same can be said for the human spirit and our longing for freedom, no matter the circumstances. The burrowing owls raise their young in abandoned dens just feet away from the prison parking lot. Here we are, they say, still here. At a time of increasing extinctions, amidst so much discouraging news, I find this deeply encouraging. **WH**