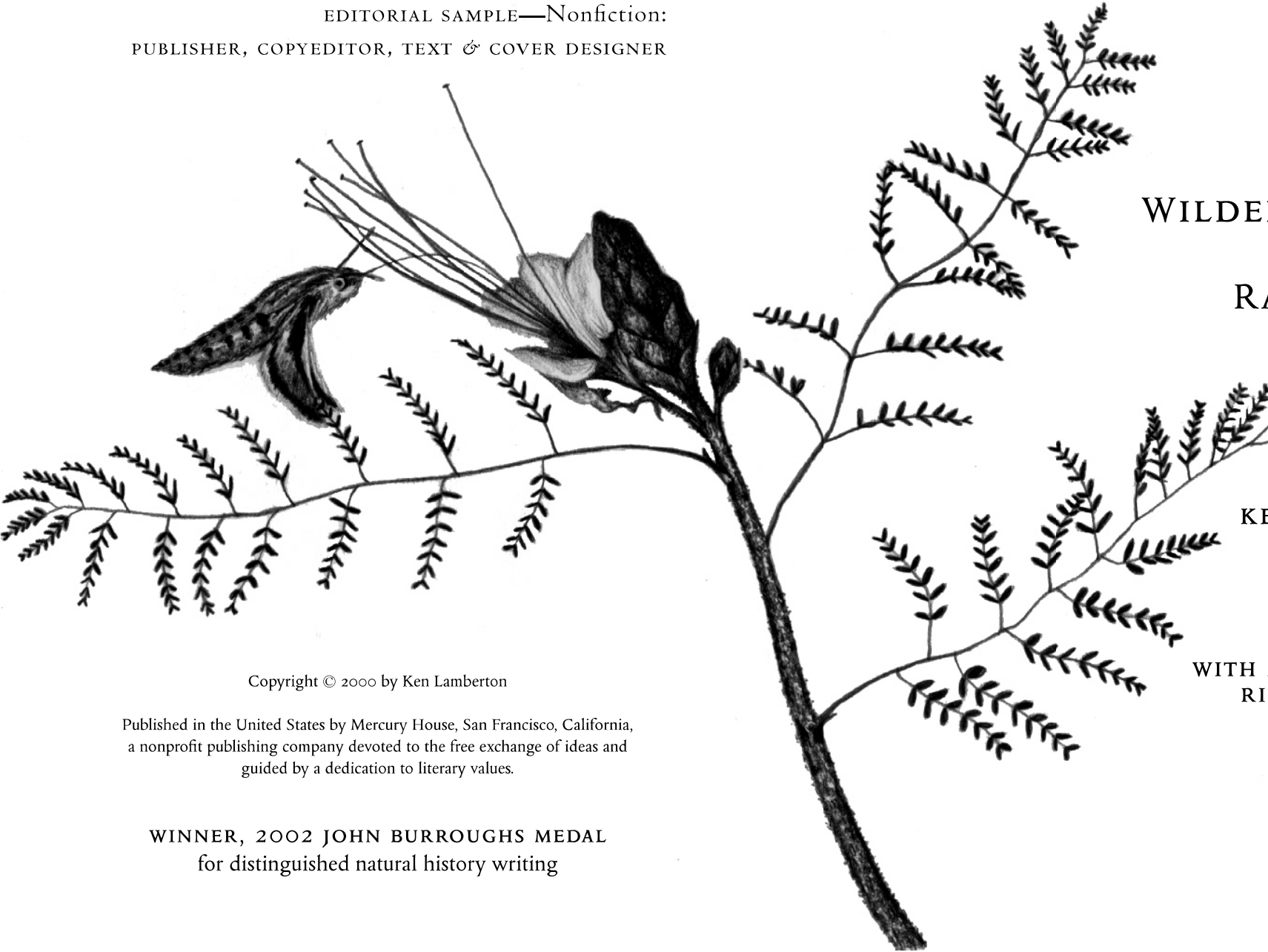


KIRSTEN JANENE-NELSON \* *Freelance Editor & Consultant*  
WWW.THE-EDITRICE.COM

EDITORIAL SAMPLE—Nonfiction:  
PUBLISHER, COPYEDITOR, TEXT & COVER DESIGNER



WILDERNESS AND  
RAZOR WIRE

KEN LAMBERTON

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
RICHARD SHELTON

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*Gambel Oak*

## THE IMPORTANCE OF TREES

On every lap during my exercise walks I pass the length of the prison visitation park. Although the metronome rhythm of my steps and thoughts may distract me elsewhere, my eyes always turn to the trees. I have a bond with them; they are familiar friends. They, like other bits of wildness confined or visiting here, expound some vital part of me in the midst of prison's two heavy hands: fear and depression. In the same way they break down the stark gray walls and cut holes in the fences, these trees particularly lessen the burden of this place. I don't know what kind they are—Chinese elm sounds nice—but they are dark and hard-green, thick with promise, though they have no more years than my oldest daughter, a teenager. I do know that these trees do not come from the desert. They are too deciduous. They are trees in need of wells.

With all the activity among the tables and trees in the inmate park, the chess games, cards, reading, guitar playing, the quiet contemplation, I wonder why we no longer have access to the visitation park. No one uses it anymore. A cage encloses the covered tables, barbecues, and grass, its

gates padlocked against unlawful entry. (TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED: an irony almost as acute as the “keep off the grass” signs that pop up here every so often.) When the park was accessible years ago, I probed its grassy regions for toads and bugs with my daughters, grilled boneless chicken breasts on Sunday afternoons, picked heady roses for my wife. But picnicking inmates quickly fell into disfavor with the public. I guess we behaved too much like real families gathering together after church. Security was a problem, so we were told (security is a blanket that covers all reason), and the park was closed. A simplistic solution from an administration with all the imagination of a lock and key.

Since then my girls and I have walked small circles—a kind of perpetual motion in prison and always in a counterclockwise direction—in the concrete visitation area, with its people-crowded ramada and tables and sandbox, hoping that the climate will change and the tree-shadowed grass of the park will become more than a cruel tease, a flagrant reminder of how much worse things can get.

Things do get worse.

This evening, burnished clouds of sunset darken to the color of unfermented wine and the moon is as pale and thin as a communion wafer. The Santa Rita Mountains in the south are flat and undefined, a purple matte framing a sheet-metal sky.

All day the landscape crews have been at work in the visitation park. They began by sledge-hammering and digging out the picnic tables and grills. They moved on to the trees when the backhoe arrived. At first I thought they might try to save these, to relocate them, perhaps at the farm. I even imagined they were using the chainsaw to prune the trees

somewhat, making them easier to handle. But this was my own fantasy; the tables and grills and flowerbeds and trees are all coming out. It's finally over for the visitation park. No more cruel tease. No more trees.

I admit I'm irrational about it. It's only a dozen trees and I'm calling it a clear-cut. I want to do an Ed Abbey on the backhoe. I'm harboring a secret wish (wrongly) that the officer in charge of dismembering the trees will lop off his own arm with the chainsaw. I'm angry, helpless. I think it is a decision made in spite. I walk past a picket line of obscene treeless trunks and see muscular arms with chopped-off hands reaching upward in some kind of plea for the maimed and dying. I'm irrational because I value something here. I've risked love. My emotional response is the evidence. These trees did more than dissolve the gray walls and dull the razor wire, rebreathing and purifying the very cast of this prison. They were more than an analgesic to numb my punishment, the fear and depression. They were a kind of living point of reference that gave me a sense of direction—physically, yes, but more so emotionally. The trees helped me to keep my bearings on how I felt about my family. Because we had shared them together, and because they hinted of rope swings and summer climbs, of names carved in wet cambium, they were firmly rooted metaphors of the love I have for my daughters, my wife. The trees connected me to a reality beyond prison.

I guess I shouldn't be angry. I shouldn't expect everyone to value the same things I do. Not in this world. There are people who willfully separate and distance themselves from nature as if they could exist independent of wildness. It is a kind of disobedience, the same kind that separated us from God in the beginning. I try to practice a faith that teaches

that God gave us dominion over the earth, but somehow, I think, we've misunderstood this gift, its purpose. Perhaps our definition of dominion has changed as we've distanced ourselves from both God and nature. Perhaps we never understood the word. Nature writer Michael Katakis was right on point when he wrote: "We took the idea of dominion over the world and its creatures to mean ownership rather than stewardship and then raised ourselves to a place we had not earned and we're not suited for. We do not do well as gods." We, in fact, were never supposed to be gods. We were supposed to be gardeners. As gods, we tend to lean toward destruction rather than creation, cutting down and rooting up rather than cultivating.

My eyes still turn to the trees. It's a habit I prefer. What I see in the visitation park, however, is more gray, more buildings, fences, razor wire. The trees are gone now; there's a barrenness that seems unnatural, and it leaves an emotional hole in me like the one I feel each time my wife and daughters exit these gates after visiting me. More obscenity: earthen craters pock the ground in the place of tree wells; torn vestiges of rootstock twist skyward in the place of trees.

I don't expect I'll ever again see that gray flycatcher in the park. I know the western kingbirds will never rebuild their nest. I won't sit in the shade with my girls and chew on grass stems they offer me or watch them roust toads or pick flowers—not here anyway. Those are family things not intended for this place.

Things change. The visitation park stands empty in a cage.

March. In the inmate park a few white iris blooms peel



*New Mexican Locust*

open in hopeless rebellion. They are alone. The rumor started by the chainsaw wielding guard that the inmate park was next is no longer rumor. The park has been a problem for some time. The peppertrees have grown too tall. Someone could climb one, hide among the branches, and imagine he's escaped. Or someone could lie down and disappear into the roses and mint. (Someone might even be brewing illegal tea from mint leaves!) Crews with the chainsaw and backhoe work feverishly to correct the error in security: all the rosebushes, privets, the Texas ranger, all the Mexican bird of paradise, the desert willow—they're coming out, cut down, chopped into sections, wrenched from the ground. The few peppertrees that survive the clearing can't take much more pruning. They lack all lower branches, their skinny trunks winding comically into high, tight crowns like trees in a Dr. Seuss story.

The policy of tree-cutting spreads its infection to the yards. Already concrete has capped off the flowerbeds in front of all the runs, entombing flower bulbs and toads, and the landscape crews have torn out the ocotillo, barrel cacti, and agave. Now it's the yucca, the catclaw acacia, the New Mexican locust in front of my cell. Shrubs are the greatest risk to security; they all go. And more trees ...

It bothers me that I had to come back to Santa Rita to witness this trend in Arizona corrections where trees have become superfluous, shrubs and flowers a threat. In two months the unit will go to controlled movement. No more open yard. The inmate park will close. The track will close. Even now a fence rises on the edge of the soccer field, soon to be our exercise cage for outside recreation at scheduled times. When that happens we'll have Bermuda grass. The park will lose

its purpose. The trees their meaning, except to the chainsaws and backhoes.

I try to console myself by remembering that I will be gone in a few months. The classification board has reduced my public risk score and has recommended another unit, minimum custody. After more than eight years here, I have to leave Santa Rita. Maybe it's time. A minimum unit should allow me the freedom to explore another wilderness behind fences.

I still believe there will always be some wilderness here. An untamed remnant that slips inside. Without trees and flowers and weeds there will be less diversity: fewer butterflies, fewer beetles, fewer bats and birds. Others will adjust, however.

There will always be ravens.