

EATURE



# Unnatural LOCKDOWNS

Essay by Kenneth E. Hartman

**L**ike everything else of consequence, green consciousness came late to the prison systems of this country. In fact, it's still a work in progress, this new outlook. It could be the immovable nature of prison—change of any kind tends to be resisted as a matter of course—or perhaps it is simply the brutal and unnatural quality of prison life. Still, some adjustments to the status quo have managed to slip in past the armed perimeters and through the electric fences.

Here in California, in the largest U.S. prison system, we've seen a few substantial steps taken over the past few years toward the greening of this environment. Prisoners are now encouraged to use rechargeable batteries, and spent batteries are collected for proper disposal. Most of the interior lighting has been transformed to lower-consuming fluorescents. Even though it's a huge bother for prisoners, cell toilets can now only be flushed a couple times in any given period of time. During lockdowns, we eat on easily biodegradable trays. There have been supposedly more changes, but from inside a cell, it's hard to tell.

I do know that the larger precepts of an environmentally friendly consciousness are banned from this world as surely as I am banned from the world on the other side of the 50-yard-wide bare dirt expanse that surrounds this compound, known as "no-man's land." A more accurate name for which would be "no-life land." After every rain, a few green shoots try to take root in this wasteland, at least until an odious blue chemical is sprayed over the whole area. The rationale is that escaping prisoners could hide in two-inch-tall plant life.

Inside the inner-security perimeter it's more of the same. Plant life is mostly exiled from our lives. (Animal life is banned even more completely.) Several years ago we convinced a reasonable administrator to allow a small flower garden. For one glorious season we had the radiant colors of nature lighting up the corner of a place that's otherwise devoid of color. When the administrator was transferred, the first act of his successor was to order the immediate destruction of the flower bed. He told me that we could use the stems as weapons.

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The more complete truth is, we were using the flowers as weapons against the darkness that is the nature of prison. So even though we used metal rakes and shovels to reshape the dirt fields, those flowers posed a dicier threat to the security of the *weltanschauung* that holds punishment for the sake of inflicting pain to be the prison's sole purpose.

It's always struck me as terribly ugly that almost nothing alive exists in here but we prisoners and our keepers. We see pigeons and seagulls, and a few crows drop down to pick through the trash bags. We're told that gophers plague the lawns around the front gate more than a mile away. Enormous effort is expended to eradicate any encroaching life that doesn't wear safety-orange coats and blue pants with its reduced status stenciled down the right leg.

This is the reason the lights blaze on every night with such heartless ferocity. Lights that never go out, and are not the comforting glow of residential streetlights. Lights that are the harshest and coldest available, which illuminate a concrete and steel wasteland with the natural world driven from it. A world of dull, artificial colors, and duller visions of how it is all supposed to function, and of what it should accomplish.

A lieutenant once told me he could fly his private plane at night from San Diego to Sacramento—600 miles—by following the lights of the prisons along the way.

Here in the Antelope Valley, north of Los Angeles, the dry, dusty wind blows all year long, colder in the wet months, hotter and dirtier in the dessicated summers. This prison, originally designed for 2,200 prisoners, holds almost 5,000 today. It is but one of a vast complex of facilities out here beyond the pale of consideration. Our numbers have overtaxed the local water and sanitation systems, crowded the roads with supply trucks, and seriously degraded the surrounding landscape.

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The greater concern ought to be this enormous chunk of land, one of hundreds all across the country, that has been denuded, quite purposefully, and poisoned in a literal as well as figurative sense. Collectively, the state, federal and private prison systems constitute the eighth-largest city in this country: a city that is not subject to any outside scrutiny or meaningful oversight. The people who live in this city of separation and remorse have no voice, to speak of, and must accept whatever is dealt their way. It is as if all the ghettos and barrios were thrown into a toxic heap, out of plain view, hidden inside a blinding glare.

So, though the prisons tend to be sited in the countryside, far from the urban wastelands from which we come, the blight of there is brought way out here, too. There's a lesson, a truth, in that sad fact. ■

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