

Broken Wing

Reginald S. Lewis

The morning began with a cluster of dark, dreary clouds hovering above the hulking castle that is Graterford Maximum Security Prison. But the gloomy weather did little to dampen my spirits, soaring with the exited anticipation of my visit with my friend, Gretel, a member of the FUMCOG committee against the death penalty.

A nature lover, she extolled the plush green countryside she'd driven through on her way to the prison. She said she was also surprised to see flocks of geese. I told her they'd flown in from Canada and made Graterford prison their home all year round.

Prisoners had nicknamed one particular Canada Goose "Broken Wing", because he had a handicap that prevented him from flying. His left wing was permanently broken. No one seemed to know the real story of what had actually caused his crippling injury. Of course, there was a gaggle of wild, extravagant rumours floating about the cell-blocks – and the lively discussion in the yard about Broken Wing's struggle was connected to our own.

But of the many stories and their different versions, most prisoners chose to believe that it was an abusive prison guard who'd inflicted the poor bird's debilitating injury. The guard had caught him grazing out in the open and ran him over with the prison transport van.

Was Broken Wing amongst the birds who advertised their disdain for our captors by swooping down during vicious attacks? They were also known to pelt their targets with fusillades of nasty bird dung.

They were silent witnesses to the guards' hateful racist remarks, slanderous gossip, cruel and petty psychological games, and the verbal and physical abuse of prisoners hustled from general population to solitary confinement.

Was Broken Wing in the wrong place at the wrong time? Was this another case of mistaken identity? **Don't all geese look alike?**

The birds knew we had nothing to do with this cowardly crime. We would never harm them. We were caged comrades in solidarity with our liberated friends. They depended upon us to feed them everyday. When we went out to the yard, we'd sprinkle all kinds of exotic goodies on the ground. They swung their long black necks towards us, studying us with kind, little beady eyes. Small bulbous heads seemed to nod thankfully.

One day, it was the birds themselves who identified the culprit who tried to murder one of their most noble comrades. They descended upon him with a fury. We saw the guard racing frantically towards the infirmary after that.

Broken Wing adjusted quite well to sedentary prison life. He refused to allow his handicap to limit him. He fathered several little healthy geese. He had an almost majestic air about him. Head held high, back arched, he struts about the prison grounds with the authority and confidence of a General. He stands on one leg, shifts, surveying the perimeters of his territory. He watches his friends entertain us with acrobatic pinwheels, propel skyward, swoop low, land gracefully, dive headlong, or streak across the sky in a magnificent display of unity.

Every morning, his crew unfailingly visits him on the ground. He settles disputes, turf wars, and obstreperous bird quarrels. They seem to consult him before taking off on some mission or excursion. He cocks his head defiantly, turns away, as if to say, "Well, go on. I'll be alright. **Go.**" They fly off, leaving him standing by the outside radiators, where, during winter, he seeks heat flowing up from the plumbing pipes.

He stands there for hours on end.

Does Broken Wing dream of one day being reunited with his family - like countless prisoners on death row, or doing life without parole? Does he fear - as most prisoners do, dying in prison?

The other day, as I was being escorted to the dentist's office, I gazed across the dusky prison grounds. "Where's Broken Wing?" I asked. "Dunno, Lewis", one guard replied. "Haven't seen 'im in several days." "Maybe they took him out", the guard on my right said.

I smiled. Yeah. Maybe they took him to a veterinarian. Or a retirement home for old wounded birds. Perhaps he'd made parole. Or received a pardon from Governor Edward G. Rendell.

Or maybe, just maybe, ole Broken Wing's crew swooped down, raided him up, and carried him over the high stone wall to freedom.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Reginald Sinclair Lewis is a widely published, award winning poet, essayist and playwright imprisoned on Pennsylvania's death row since 1983. He is the author of two books of poetry; *Leaving Death Row* (2000) (www.authorhouse.com) and *Inside My Head* (2002) (www.iuniverse.com).

His most recent book is entitled, *Where I'm Writing From: Essays from Pennsylvania's Death Row* (2005) (Baltimore: Publish America).

An established prison writer, his work has won three P.E.N. America writing awards. His play, *An Affinity for Angels*, was selected and performed at the 4th Annual *Festival of New Works* at the Actor's Theatre in Louisville in 2002.

Mr. Lewis continues to fight against his conviction and death sentence handed down in Judge Albert F. Sabo's court in 1983.

For more information, visit www.reginaldslewis.org.