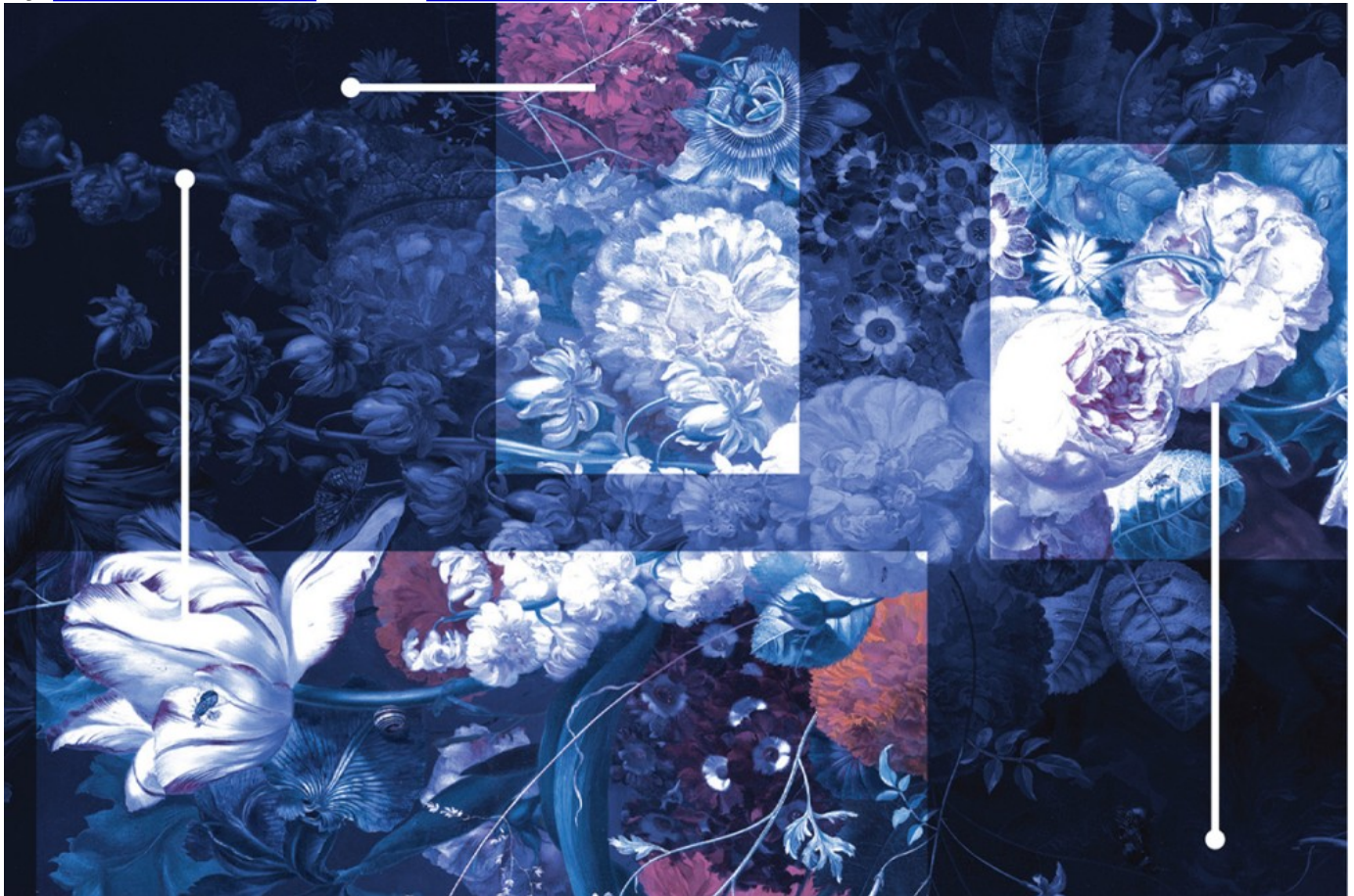


A prison cell transfigured

While teaching in a prison, I got to know a gardener.

by [Isaac S. Villegas](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue



(Source image from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY)

Several years ago, as I walked through a prison compound in North Carolina, I noticed flowers: native plants, patches of white and purple phloxes, baptisia, witch hazel, and forsythia alight with yellow blooms. The vegetation graced a section of the sidewalks that connected the housing units to the dining hall, chapel, classrooms, and garment factory where residents sew uniforms for the military for no more than \$2 per hour. Every week, after I cleared the ID check and metal detectors, I would make my way through the austere courtyard to the classroom

where I'd teach a class for the imprisoned men. I'd always pause at the patch of garden to take note of the changing palette of colors as the winter turned to spring, the spring to summer—life bursting into the drab confinement of the carceral landscape.

I got to know the gardener during my weekly visits. He was one of the prisoners in my class. He told me that, for the past decade of his life there in the facility, he'd witnessed flowering plants sneak their way through the layers of chain-link fencing—seeds trespassing into the enclosure, planting themselves just inside the guarded perimeter. He persuaded the prison administration to let him transplant the vegetation, to cultivate a home for it in the middle of the prison—glimpses of brightness, of beauty in defiance of the concrete gloom.

This was one of his tactics of survival for incarceration. “Do the time; don't let the time do you,” prisoners say. Despite the conditions of debasement, he cultivated a relationship of mutual care: carceral gardening as tending to his solidarity with fellow prisoners and the earth, one form of life nourishing the other. He wanted something beautiful, he told me, something irrepressibly alive. So he transformed a piece of his everyday existence into a sign for life beyond captivity—plants and flowers plotting a transfiguration.

In the middle of Matthew's Gospel, as the crowds wonder if this Jesus will prove his divine power by calling down signs from heaven, manifestations of God's kingdom on earth, Jesus withdraws with a few of his friends. There, with them in a lonely place, Jesus is transfigured with a flash. A cloud surrounds all of them—an immersion into the wonders of God. For a moment, on that plot of earth, they are baptized with heaven. Transfiguration is a dazzling moment of revelation, mysteries glimpsed in a blink of an eye. Soon they return to the everyday, but now they have eyes to see the promises of God: the world alive with hope.

I read a nature book recently about wildlife in the Sonoran Desert, an Arizona landscape familiar to me from my childhood. Descriptions of plants and animals were accompanied by pictures—some painted in watercolor, others sketched with pencil. The author was a prisoner in a facility beyond the southeastern edge of Tucson, Arizona, toward the Santa Rita Mountains. From his vantage point inside confinement, he became a naturalist by noticing the distinctive flora and fauna of the region.

On page after page I read his documentation of the life that sneaks through the fences and walls: hawk moths fluttering around light bulbs on the cellblock, barn swallows nesting in the visitation ramada, the howling laughter of coyotes at night, the smell of creosote bushes just before a monsoon rain, a Sonoran mud turtle wandering into the yard, the regular visits from sun spiders and harvester ants, tiger whiptail lizards sunbathing on windowsills.

He painted and sketched all the creatures he met while in prison, a picture book full of images of plants and animals and insects—a testimony about the sustenance and nourishment of the wilderness in providing what he needed to keep on living, to keep on surviving. He also included stories about how he and his friends would welcome birds to build nests on their window ledges, between the bars. As hosts they'd put out nibbles of food and scare away predators, all part of making a safe environment for the chicks—prison cells transfigured into a habitat for life-sustaining beauty, the cold ugliness transformed by the warmth of care.

Transfigurations happen. Sometimes we get to witness them; most of the time we don't. But we trust that God still loves this world. We believe that God still dazzles us with wonder, with the warmth of human care, earthly life transfigured with heaven.

We offer each other signs of hope, like the gardener I met in prison. We gather what we can find from the wildlife of God—seeds of faith, hope, and love—and cultivate our lives as plots for transfiguration.