

Ear Hustle
Episode 101: A Rock Across a Lake
March 6, 2024

[pensive music]

Sky: I want to see the new horizons and explore the world around me. Smell a puppy. Hug a horse. Listen to birds sing. Go to the zoo. Bake loaves of bread. Lay in a meadow. Pick a flower and watch it. Smell it. Grow a tree. Have a plant in dirt. Have cases of chewing gum. Go to a used bookstore. Buy another camera and make postcards again. Go to a fancy place to eat.

[eerie music]

I'd like to go to a ghost town. Walk in it, sit down, and take it all in. Drink out of a real glass. Sleep in the raw. Be in the raw for hours. Go to a pound. Buy some clothes just for me. Have an ice box. Take a long bath for hours. I want to throw a rock across the lake. Draw some patterns. Do blankets out of yarn again. Make a plant hanger from ceiling to floor. Have a real door with no windows in it. Have a tall mirror. Have a cookie jar again. Write my own songs.

[pensive music]

Go to a tanning place. Go to a store. Walk around and smell all the good smells. Go to a pet store, a toy store. Go swimming in a lake. I want to smell a puppy. I want to go run on the beach and climb a tree. Climb a mountain. Stand under a waterfall. Lay on a flat rock and sunbathe. See a few dear friends. Live in peace. Touch a rabbit. Buy a dog. Have a real Christmas tree. Hold money in my hand. Have keys. Have a life of my own. Go to the highest mountain and yell my head off. Build a log home. Have fruit trees, nut trees. Go fishing. And learn how to work a cell phone.

[pensive music]

Earlonne: Nyge, let's tell people who this is and what we're doing here.

Nigel: Okay, this is Sky. We met her recently at the California Institution for Women, and she's reading a poem she wrote. So, Earlonne, I'm going to ask you, how would you describe Sky?

Earlonne: From my memory, she's very tall, and she got this long, flowing silver hair.

Nigel: Exactly. And it's kind of wild and beautiful. And when she came to the interview, she pulled out this poem she'd written. This long, typewritten document.

Earlonne: Yes. And sometime, when someone pulls out a poem they've written, you'd be like, "Mm-hm."

Nigel: [laughs] Oh, totally. But this time, we just decided to see where it was going to go.

Earlonne: I'm Earlonne Woods.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor and this is Ear Hustle from PRX's Radiotopia.

[pensive music]

Sky: I want to watch sunset and the sunrise. Have more than two pairs of shoes, and go to a fancy hotel for a weekend. Wear silk clothes, girl things. Grow blackberries. Listen to the whales sing. Have geese again, good watchdogs. Go to the racetrack. Make quilts again. Go skydiving. Make cherry pies, apple pies, peach pies. Make wind chimes again. Walk in the snow. Ride a horse in it too. I want to do some fishing. Dive off a cliff again. Have a wood stove. Go hiking. Lay in a field and watch the clouds. Kiss a baby calf. Kiss a cow. Watch stars in the moonlight sky. Pet elephants. Have a garden, walnut trees and a fireplace.

Nigel: Do you remember the first time we saw Sky?

Earlone: Yes, I do. It was when we was visiting CIW.

Nigel: Right.

Earlone: And we were sitting out in a little garden behind the housing unit doing an interview with somebody. And from what I remember, she walked by and she was pushing maybe a cart or a wheelbarrow.

Nigel: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Earlone: And she was gardening, I think that's what I remember.

Nigel: And she had this almost regal quality about her, and I don't think she had time for anything or anyone outside of her own world.

Earlone: She was very intriguing. I mean, I think we both was curious to get to know her.

Nigel: Oh, I was definitely eyeballing her.

Earlone: So, the next time were down at CIW, we got a chance to talk to her. We sat down at a picnic table in the same garden where we first saw her. Turns out Sky has been in prison for 37 years.

Nigel: Yeah. I mean, she's a really longtime resident at CIW. Can I call her an OG?

Earlone: For sure.

Nigel: *So, if you had to describe yourself, how would you describe who you are?*

Sky: *What's my purpose?*

Nigel: *No, just like your personality.*

Sky: *I'm creative. I don't smoke, and I don't drink. I'm easygoing until you step on my toes, and then I step back.*

Nigel: *Yeah. How would you describe what CIW is to you? Is it a home? Is it a place you're here for a while?*

Sky: *Well, I have a lot of my family around me that I grew up with here.*

Nigel: *When you say family, are those people you've just known for a really long time?*

Sky: *Yes.*

Nigel: *Yeah. So, do you consider this home?*

Sky: *Yes.*

Nigel: *And what makes it home?*

Sky: *Look at my backyard.*

Nigel: *I know. When we were sitting out here waiting for you, I was like, "This is actually quite beautiful."*

Sky: *Yes. We make it that way.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Sky: *We have plants that other places don't have plants. We have trees that haven't been taken down. We have raccoons that like to climb the roof, and they come and they get into the trees and I see them from my window because my window is right over there.*

Nigel: *What are the benefits for you staying in here?*

Sky: *I'm safe. I have three meals a day.*

Nigel: *So, if you had the opportunity to leave, would you?*

Sky: *Where would I go?*

Earlone: Every now and then, we meet someone like Sky, who has been in prison so long they're no longer trying to go home because prison is home.

Nigel: Yeah, but that's why that poem of hers that we were hearing earlier is so perplexing and intriguing to me because even though she seems at home in prison, that poem is so incredibly full of detail about what she misses outside.

Earlone: Right.

[pensive music]

Sky: I want to go to ballparks and watch baseball and football. I want to go to a graveyard. I want to watch the waves on the beach. Open a craft store. Talk to an operator. Say goodbye to the past. Pet baby critters and have clothes that fit me.

[acoustic music]

I want to take a trip back to my birthplace in Alaska. Go to a lighthouse, drive- one second. Go to a lighthouse and drive on Route 66. Learn to fly a plane. Have turquoise rings again. Go visit a few friends and have stickers. Learn the Scottish language. Drink out of a glass mug. Go ride a train and sleep in it too. Be able to have a bed [chuckles] that is long enough to fit my long legs. Make cakes of all sizes. Go to a rodeo and watch the steers and broncos. Ride a horse in the snow. Have a tent. Go camping. Go to a donut shop and enjoy the smells. Eat with utensils that are not plastic. I want to wear pantyhose in the colors of black, yellow, pink, sky blue, green, soft purples.

Buy a bike and ride around and see the sights. Go to a museum. Wear some cowboy boots. See all four seasons. Have my hair done in a salon. Pet a tiger. Raise livestock again. Have

chickens and eggs of many colors. Sail on the gulf. Go to an airport and watch the planes come and go. Take a vacation. Chop wood. Cook on an open fire. Build a treehouse. Eat candy cane ice cream on a cone. Read a book on tape for the blind. Share my wisdom with others. Have a teepee. Go to the fair. Train dogs. Dress up for Halloween. Sell artwork. Go to a video store. Take a wagon train adventure. Watch air balloons fly into the sky. Visit my mom's grave. Hug my brothers and sisters and forgive them all.

And above all, stay free. I have been down 37 years. If I can't do it now, I can do them in my dreams. By Whispering Sky.

Nigel: Earlonne, what are some of the images that stand out to you when you're listening to the poem?

Earlonne: There was a few of them, but the two that come to mind is chop wood and pet a tiger.

Nigel: Yeah, yeah, yeah. What about that idea of the wagon train adventure?

Earlonne: [laughs] Is that like one of them back in the days?

Nigel: Exactly. I just see her wearing like a little petticoat or something. And the poem is so alive with imagery and things that are existing outside of the walls.

Earlonne: Right.

Nigel: But again, for Sky, prison's her home now, and she says she's okay with that.

Nigel: *Most people you meet in prison talk about just how they want to get out. They just want to be out. And it seems like there maybe is something almost shameful about not being on that bandwagon, that this is the worst place. Have you ever confronted that?*

Sky: *No. It doesn't bother me. I watch my friends leave, but they're there when I need them. All of us lifers that are here depend on each other.*

Nigel: *Do you think that people that are in your situation are just tossed away because there's not a real safety net?*

Sky: *Our family is already here.*

Nigel: *Yeah.*

Sky: *You're not getting that little tiny piece that the family is already here.*

Nigel: *Oh, so you don't feel lonely?*

[guitar music]

Sky: *No. I write poems and stuff. So, I feel very comfortable where I am because I've made it that way.*

Nigel: *Do you think you'll spend the rest of your life here?*

Sky: *Yes.*

Earlonne: So, curious. Outside of these walls, do you have thoughts of, like, walking on the beach?

Sky: I see the beach every time I turn on the TV on certain channels. You know what I mean? Yeah, I used to do that. Yeah. I used to swim, dive. I play sports here. Volleyball, baseball, tennis, handball.

Earlonne: Still? You still play handball to this day?

Sky: Mm-hm.

Earlonne: Still good at it. Still hitting kill shots?

Sky: Mm-hmm. Do you know what the volleyball was? My mother's head. Anger. Any anger that you have, you put it on the ball.

Nigel: Slam balls at the gym. That's what I do.

Earlonne: Who's face you put on it?

Nigel: Nobody at this table, [laughter] that's for sure. So, what makes your life good in here? What are the things that bring you joy and peace.

Sky: Quietness. Everything that I put on paper. All my poems that I do right now, it's all in me. And I like it. I can read it over and over again and I can add to it each time because there's other things that has happened that I would like to do or I'd like to see. I see things on TV that I want to do, I'll put it down on paper. But I don't ever think I'm going to get out.

Nigel: So, you've found a way to satisfy these needs in a way that works for Sky.

Sky: Yes.

Nigel: I think what she's saying here is that the poem isn't static. It's this living document of all the things she imagines doing as she's imagining them. I mean, for her, it is totally real.

Earlonne: Yeah. I mean, like you said, it's like she's literally doing this stuff.

Nigel: Do you think that you have a more active imagination than most people?

Sky: If I want to just disappear from everybody, I sit down and write my poems.

Nigel: Yeah.

Earlonne: So, it's technically the world that you escape to, which is your writing, which is inside your head, which is inside your heart. It's your secret place.

Nigel: I wonder if 'escape' is the right word. Because escape suggests that you are-

Sky: Are leaving yourself.

Nigel: Yeah. I feel like-

Sky: That's not it. I don't leave myself. I enjoy what I do. Everything in here, I enjoy.

Nigel: *What I feel like you're saying is you don't need to escape. It's very present and real for you.*

Sky: *Right.*

Nigel: *And most people don't have that level of creativity, to create a world for themselves in a difficult place and really exist in it and not see it as an escape.*

Sky: *It's peace. It's peace of mind. It's really peaceful.*

Nigel: *We were so stuck on what felt like a contradiction about you saying you didn't want to get out of prison, that you're okay being here. And then, these poems that are just bursting with beautiful things to do outside. Are we wrong to see that as a contradiction?*

Sky: *When you see something different, some people cry. They didn't realize just how much is missing out of their life with everything that they haven't done or they wanted to do.*

Nigel: *Okay, then you just made me think of how I want to say this. I'm not surprised that people cry, because that list is so full of detail and it makes you think, "Man, I want to get all this stuff done. It's such an expansive list." Does it make you cry?*

[pensive music]

Sky: *Mm-hmm.*

Nigel: *No. So, I think that's what's hard for us to get our minds around that. We feel emotional about that. But for you, you're experiencing it because you're writing it and thinking about it and I guess living it somehow.*

Sky: *It's kind of crazy the way you guys think and the way I think. Everybody has different thinking.*

Nigel: *Mm-hmm.*

Nigel: *So, Sky, I want to say something to you about this, and I don't particularly want you to respond but I think this is really beautiful. And I love the list is so comprehensive and it's such a beautiful self-portrait. But I also love that to me, in the little bit that I know you, it's this wonderful contradiction, you saying that you don't want to be out there, but then being able to write this incredibly full visual expression of what you do want to do out there, and I can live with that contradiction in you. And I think that's really beautiful.*

[nature sounds]

Earlone: *[whispers] Nyge.*

Nigel: *[whispers] Yes.*

Earlone: *[whispers] We got to pause and drop some messages in here.*

Nigel: *Okay, let's do it. And we'll be right back.*

[ambient noises]

Nigel: Earlonne, it's unusual for us to spend an entire episode on one person's writing, but Sky's poem was so concrete and specific.

Earlonne: Yeah, I think the poem is how she found a way to survive a long prison term. Like, it's a way to do things in her mind that she can't do in prison.

Nigel: And that one poem felt like a complete story. You know what I mean?

Earlonne: But it turns out she had another poem.

Sky: Here are the things that I have been able to do inside. I've held newborn critters and birds too. I've moved to a calmer unit. I'm able to lie on the grass and watch the clouds take shape. I've had ice cream on a cone. I've had a donut or two. I've held and kissed a baby and smelled baby puppies. I've eaten a large, soft, warm pretzel. I've watched the stars in the moonlight sky. I've hugged my best friend. I've made wind chimes again. I've been cross-stitching. I've made apple pies. I've held and kissed a kitten. I've made a plant hanger from ceiling to floor. I drank out of a glass mug. I've worked in a garden. I've watched planes fly overhead. I've drawn some animals for a video. I've made quilts again. I've planted a tree. I now have clothes that fit me.

I've made all kinds of cheesecakes. I've eaten a banana split ice cream. I've listened to whales on tape. I have a cookie jar now. I've held a baby bunny in my arms and kissed it too. I watched the sunset. I've continued to crochet blankets. I still train dogs of all sizes. I make more puzzles. I've allowed myself to have three pairs of shoes. I've grown a flower or two. I've helped move several of my friends. I've made candy again. I've watched a sunrise. I've been diagnosed with skin cancer. And in spite of it all, I still have peace of mind. By Whispering Sky.

Earlonne: Banana split. That'll be on my list too.

Nigel: Definitely. And I feel like she can just keep adding to this. Like, both of these poems, they're going to keep evolving.

Earlonne: Right. Like a record of her life, both real and imagined.

[nature sounds]

Earlonne: Nyge, how's that PO box looking?

Nigel: Okay, so since Ear Hustle started, we've kept a PO box for old fashioned snail mail, letters sent to us by listeners. And when we started, 95% of the letters we got were from people outside of the walls. But recently, that's flipped.

Earlonne: Yeah, these days, almost all the letters we get come from people in prison. I guess they're finding out about us on their new prison tablets that carry Ear Hustle. So, we've got a lot of new listeners in prison, and some of them are starting to reach out to us.

Nigel: So, once a month, our team gets together and we read the letters. And recently, we got a letter from a guy who goes by Rooster, who's incarcerated at Mori Correctional Facility in North Carolina.

Earlonne: Okay, hold on. Imma get this letter. Hey, imma read it. Rooster says, "I'm part of a three-man vent line conversation every day myself, aka Rooster, and my two fellow Ear Hustlers get on our vents after lockdown and discuss our favorite episodes and stories. We call it our post-game show."

Nigel: So, here's a shoutout to Rooster and his friends, Chulo and Iceman, talking to each other through the air vents after lockdown. Amazing. I love picturing this. Thanks so much for writing to us.

Earlonne: Indeed.

[guitar music]

Season 13.

Nigel: Lucky 13.

Earlonne: We've got some cool shit coming up this season, including our first mystery episode.

Nigel: Okay, I've got to explain this a little bit because these episodes are mysteries to you and me. You are going to do an episode that I don't know anything about, and I'm going to do an episode you don't know anything about, and then we are going to introduce them to each other for the first time and record. I'm super excited about it.

Earlonne: You know the difference between us?

Nigel: What?

Earlonne: Yours is already done.

[laughter]

Nigel: Not done, but I've been working on it. Let's just say that.

Earlonne: we're also making a trip to a really special place for episode about dying in prison.

Nigel: I know that sounds really heavy.

Earlonne: But there was a lot of hope there. And we got a return of our Catch A Kite episode.

Nigel: And some very intriguing stories from women's prisons, as well as of course, our home base, San Quentin. 13 is going to be a good one.

Earlonne: Ear Hustle is produced by me, Earlonne Woods, Nigel Poor, Amy Standen, Bruce Wallace, and Rahsaan "New York" Thomas.

Nigel: Shabnam Sigman is our managing producer.

Earlonne: The producing team inside San Quentin includes Derrell Sadiq Davis, Tony de Trinidad, and Tam Nguyen. The inside managing producer is Tony Tafoya.

Nigel: Earlonne Woods sound designs and engineers the show with help from Fernando Arruda, Harry Culhane, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, and Derrell Sadiq Davis.

Earlonne: With music contributions from me, Earlonne Woods, Rhashiyd Zinnamon, Derrell Sadiq Davis, Tam Nguyen, Lee Jaspar, and Antwan Williams.

Nigel: Thanks to Warden Andes and Lt. Berry at San Quentin and Warden Williams at the California Institution for Women for their support of the show. And also, thanks to this guy here.

Lieutenant Newborg: I am Lieutenant Newborg, Public Information Officer at the California Institution for Women, and I approve this episode.

Earlone: This episode is made possible by the Just Trust, working to amplify the voices, vision, and power of communities that are transforming the justice system.

Nigel: For more information about this episode, check out the show notes on Ear Hustle's website, earhustlesq.com.

Earlone: You can also find out more about the show on Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube at [earhustlesq](http://earhustlesq.com).

Nigel: YouTube?

Earlone: We're back up.

Nigel: Wow, that's exciting. And if you want more Ear Hustle, subscribe to Ear Hustle Plus.

Earlone: We've got bonus episodes and live chats where we get to chop it up with listeners about the show.

Nigel: And I love these "ask me anything" episodes that we've been doing. They're super fun. It's where we hang out and talk with our executive producer, Bruce Wallace, about behind the scenes stuff and answer listeners' questions. Earlone, honestly, aren't they a blast?

Earlone: And that's funny that you say that, Nyge, because the listeners have spoken. They want more Bruce.

Nigel: I know. He is great on the mic.

Earlone: Definitely, superstar. [Nigel laughs] Subscribe [@earhustlesq.com/plus](https://www.instagram.com/earhustlesq) or in the Apple Podcast app.

Nigel: And don't forget to sign up for our newsletter, The Lowdown. Every issue's got extra tidbits.

Earlone: Like this week, you can see Sky's actual poem that she brought to the interview.

Nigel: And you can also read about this new long-term project we just started working on at a juvenile detention center in New York.

Earlone: Yep, we're stacking up the miles this year.

Nigel: We are. And I'm loving it. It is always great to be on the road together.

Earlone: Subscribe at earhustlesq.com/newsletter and while you're at it, leave us a review on Apple Podcasts. That's a big help to the show, and we appreciate you for it.

Nigel: Ear Hustle is a proud member of Radiotopia from PRX, a network of independent, creator-owned, listener-supported podcasts.

Earlone: Discover audio with vision at *Radiotopia.fm*.

Nigel: I'm Nigel Poor.

Earlone: I'm Earlone Woods.

In Unison: Thanks for listening.

[music]

Nigel: So, we've never done an interview with this many people, and a furry creature with us. So, this would be interesting.

Sky: Here's another one, furry quirk.

Earlone: We got a few furry creatures.

Nigel: Who's the other one?

Sky: Oh, yeah.

Earlone: These dead cats.

Sky: We've got some dead cats with us.

[Transcript provided by [SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription](#)]

End of Episode