God's Preference for the Murderer

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A Theology of the Condemned

Jeff Hood

Complicit Press

God's Preference for the Murderer: A Theology of the Condemned

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The accounts of executions in this book are the author's own eyewitness testimony, given as a spiritual advisor to the condemned. The men named were executed by the states of Alabama, Florida, Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas from 2023 to 2026.

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First edition.

For the fourteen,
who blessed the one who came to bless them.

And for Greg and Dennis,
whom the state kept me from standing beside.

I was in prison and you visited me.

MATTHEW 25:36

Contents

Introduction: The Room....1

Part One: Before the Row....9
1 The Victim....11
2 The Crime....17
3 The Trial....24

Part Two: Before the Chamber....29
4 The Row....31
5 The Warrant....37
6 The Search....42
7 The Visitation Room....46
8 The Meal....51
9 The Walk....56

Part Three: The Chamber....61
10 The Holding Cell....63
11 The Door....68
12 The Chamber....73
13 The Hand....79
14 The Reading....84
15 The Curtain....90
16 The Final Words....95

Part Four: The Killing....101
17 The Poison....103
18 The Gas....109
19 The Rifle....116
20 The Sign....121
21 The Time....126

Part Five: After....133
22 The Way Out....135
23 The Body....141

Conclusion: The Preferential Option for the Murderer....147

Postscript....153

About the Author....154

The Fourteen

SCOTT EIZEMBER Oklahoma, January 12, 2023, lethal injection

ARTHUR BROWN JR. Texas, March 9, 2023, lethal injection

ANTHONY SANCHEZ Oklahoma, September 21, 2023, lethal injection

CASEY MCWHORTER Alabama, November 16, 2023, lethal injection

KENNETH SMITH Alabama, January 25, 2024, nitrogen gas

MICHAEL SMITH Oklahoma, April 4, 2024, lethal injection

DAVID HOSIER Missouri, June 11, 2024, lethal injection

EMMANUEL LITTLEJOHN Oklahoma, September 26, 2024, lethal injection

STEVEN NELSON Texas, February 5, 2025, lethal injection

ANTHONY WAINWRIGHT Florida, June 10, 2025, lethal injection

ANTHONY BOYD Alabama, October 23, 2025, nitrogen gas

DUSTY RAY SPENCER Florida, June 25, 2026, lethal injection

WILLIAM SILVIA Florida, August 18, 2026, lethal injection

JAMAAL HOWARD Texas, October 7, 2026, lethal injection

TWO MEN THE STATE KEPT ME FROM STANDING BESIDE

GREG HUNT Alabama, June 10, 2025, nitrogen gas

DENNIS SOCHOR Florida, July 14, 2026, lethal injection

Introduction

The Room

The sanctuary the state built.

The Chamber

The room is small. It is always small, because the state builds its most consequential space at the size of a bathroom, then fills it with steel. A gurney sits in the center with its arms flung open, leather straps hang from the rails, and the walls are cinder block painted the color of a hospital that gave up. Fluorescent tubes hum. There is a microphone, there is a clock, there is a window with chairs behind it.

The room smells like bleach. Under the bleach, floor wax. Under the wax, the prisoners who mopped it. The condemned man's neighbors cleaned the room where he will die, which the state files as a work detail.

In Alabama, the way in runs through a sea of cats. In Oklahoma, it is steel steps, then a hooded man at the top. In Missouri, the walls are mirrors, so that you watch yourself while a man is killed beside you. In Florida, a mirror hangs over the gurney so no one can say they did not see. In Texas, the room is a dungeon with two windows for looking in. Every state has decided how the last room will look, and each of those decisions is a belief about the man who will lie in it.

I have stood in that room fourteen times. I have knelt. I have put my hand on a shin because the shin was what I was permitted to touch. I have felt a chest

go still under my palm. I have watched a face behind a mask fight for air that was not there. I have counted a man's gasps past two hundred.

Nothing in the room is neutral. The straps were designed, someone decided where I would stand, someone measured the distance between my mouth and his ear. No one can build a place to kill a man without building a theology of the man, and that theology is written into the walls.

I came to know the room as a spiritual advisor. The phrase is the state's. It appears in protocols, in court orders, in the waiver Alabama handed me before the first nitrogen execution in the history of the world: a page stating that the gas might kill me too. I signed it. I wanted to be in the room more than I wanted to be safe. That wanting belongs to my confession, which this book makes.

The men I have accompanied were murderers. I use the word without the softening abolitionists reach for. They killed people. Some maintained their innocence to the end, which is its own horror, but innocence is not the ground of this book. The ground is the room. In the room, the state kills murderers, and God is in the room.

This book is neither a memoir nor a book about the death penalty. It is the founding statement of a theology that did not exist until men on death row forced it into being in front of me, and I am calling it condemned theology. It has one doctrine at its center, a handful of consequences, and a method that will look strange. The method is the room.

The Sentence

God prefers murderers.

Two words carry the weight, and the first is prefers. Preference is not mercy, because mercy comes after the verdict while preference comes before it. It is where the eye goes first. The shepherd leaves ninety-nine in the open to go after one, and the story never says the one was sorry. The movement comes before the repentance, so the preference is no reward for turning. It is what turns.

The tradition has always known this in fragments. It has spoken of a God drawn to the low place, to the widow, the stranger, the poor, then stopped at

the edge of the guilty, where innocence runs out. Condemned theology walks past that edge, down to the bottom, and the bottom is the man who killed.

The second word is murderer. Guilty was available, and so was condemned, but both can be erased. Say the guilty, and the reply comes back that all have sinned, so it is no preference at all. Say the condemned, and the reply is that the innocent sit on the row too. Murderer closes both doors, since no one says we are all murderers with a straight face. It is also the state's word. The indictment does not say guilty: it says murder. I take the state's word off its own paperwork and hand it to God.

There is a further reason, stranger than the first. Grace does not only flow toward the murderer, it flows from him. The law came through a man who killed an Egyptian and hid the body in the sand, the psalms through a man who arranged a death by letter, the church's letters through a man who held the coats at a stoning. The first city was built by the first murderer, under a mark God put on him to keep him alive. The murderer is one of grace's authors as well as its object.

I thought I was bringing God to Scott Eizember on a cold morning in McAlester, when he was bringing God to me. The grace that filled the chamber did not come through the window from the witnesses, it came from the gurney. This book takes that as data.

Fourteen men. Five states. Two methods. Poison, twelve times. Gas, twice, in the same Alabama room, twenty-one months apart. The rifle I have not seen. Idaho has built a chamber for it, and I have said on the record that I intend to be in that room if asked. I will not describe the rifle as though I have stood beside it. Its chapter is written by a man waiting at a door.

Every one of those men was convicted of being somebody's murderer. Every one of them blessed somebody before he died. No theology I have engaged can hold both facts, and the room refuses the choice between them. In the room, the murderer is still the murderer, the blessing is still the blessing, and God is still God.

The Liturgy

The state calls it a protocol. It is a liturgy.

The warrant is the call to worship. The last meal is the eucharist the state cannot stop serving though it no longer knows why. The walk from the holding cell is the procession. The last words are the confession, or the sermon, depending on the man. The straps are the binding of the offering. The curtain is the veil. The witnesses are the congregation, seated in rows, facing the altar. The pronouncement of death is the benediction. Then the body is handed to the family, or to the county, and the sanctuary is mopped.

A liturgy confesses what its people believe, and the state's confesses three things. It confesses that the man's life is heavy. No one writes forty pages of ritual to dispose of trash. It took twelve guards and a state official to strap Kenny Smith to the gurney. The state does not believe he is nothing: it believes he is so much that it has to build a temple to get rid of him.

It confesses that blood atones, that one death is supposed to settle another. The victim's family is seated facing the altar because the state has promised them that what happens on the gurney will close what happened to their child, and it is the oldest theology in the world. Every execution happens on Abraham's mountain. It just leaves out the ram.

It confesses that there is a place the preference does not reach. The protocol has a role for everyone in the room: warden, executioner, witness, doctor, spiritual advisor. It has no role for God. The liturgy is a mass with the altar full and the tabernacle empty.

The room says otherwise, which is the argument of the book. Every chapter takes one station of the state's liturgy and reports what happened there, with God present. The state handed me the structure, numbered, because a protocol is a creed with God crossed out.

No chapter argues first. Each begins in the room, with what I saw, and the doctrine comes after, because the room forced it. Theology is usually made at a desk, where a doctrine is proposed, scripture is consulted, a position is reached, which is how a discipline stays respectable and also how it stays useless in a death chamber. Theology built at a desk about the death penalty produces balance, it produces the word tension. The room has no tension. The room has a man on a gurney, and either God prefers him or God does not.

No one has ever been strapped to a desk.

Condemned theology starts from the body, the way a physician does not argue with the wound, he asks what made it. This book asks the same of the

room: what must be true for that to have happened? A murderer strapped to a table blesses the warden who is killing him, so something is true about God that the process did not anticipate. When the tradition cannot account for what the room said, the book does not soften the room to save the tradition. It lets the tradition break.

Its consequences are universalist. If the preference lands on the murderer before repentance, in the middle of the state's attempt to prove otherwise, there is no one below him. I will not assert that here, as though every room had already been walked. A claim that size is earned station by station, in the bodies, and the book states it in full only at the time of death.

A word about the phrase. The condemned are not this theology's topic. They are its standpoint. All theology is done from somewhere, and the place shapes what can be seen. This one is done from the row, from the chamber, from the location of the person the state has decided to kill. Move the standpoint back to the seminar room, and the seeing disappears.

A word about pronouns. This book says he, because the fourteen I stood beside were men. The row is not a row of men. I serve women too, and the chapter on the row names two of them. Read he as the word the room gave me. The preference has no box for sex.

I Was in Prison

One sentence gives this book its standing, and it was said by the one who would be executed. *I was in prison and you visited me* (Matthew 25:36).

He does not say the prisoner reminds him of himself. He says: I was in prison. The prisoner is the address where Christ said he would be found.

The church has read that passage as ethics, when it is a location. It tells the church where God is, so that the church can go there. God is in the cell, on the gurney, in the flesh of the one the state has thrown away, which is why the state's whole liturgy is performed on God.

Notice who is judged in the parable: the visitors, or the ones who did not visit, never the prisoner. The state calls him the condemned. Scripture says the condemned are the ones who looked away.

The incarnation did not end in Bethlehem. God took flesh once and never stopped. *The Word became flesh* (John 1:14), and flesh is not selective. God did

not take a body that was safe from the charge. God took the body that gets charged.

So, when I say God prefers murderers, I am saying something about where the Word is. It is where it was on Friday: in the condemned body, under the sentence, inside the state's judgment. That is why the grace flows from the gurney outward. It follows the direction of the incarnation, not the man's virtue. The men did not become my God. Christ met me through them. The bread does not stop being bread when it becomes the body. Scott did not stop being Scott when he became the place Christ was standing.

The book keeps three words close: suffering, death, restoration. They are the shape of the passion. They are the shape of every execution I have witnessed. A theology that stops at the suffering is lament. One that stops at the death is protest. Condemned theology goes to the third day, because the one who said I was in prison did not stay in the prison, and neither does anyone he takes flesh in.

The Advisor

I am not clean. I walked in. Fourteen times a door opened, and I walked through it under my own power: I sued Oklahoma for the right, I signed Alabama's paper about the gas. I have walked through the horror repeatedly, and a man who wants the room that badly has to ask what he is there for.

The state has an answer: my presence certifies the execution, since it lets the warden write that the man had spiritual care, and my name is on the state's paperwork, on the side of the page that killed. I told myself I was there for him. I was. Both things are true.

In Missouri, the tube carrying the poison ran under my elbow, close enough to rip from the wall. I did not. In nightmares, I have regularly been asked why I did not tear the mask off. I have no answer that makes sense. I am just trying to be there for the next one.

After each execution, I went home, and he did not. The men are in the ground, or in an urn on a shelf, while I am on television. I know what that looks like.

So, the advisor is inside the room, not above it. The preference this book announces must cover the man who helped the state look humane, or the book

is a fraud. It does. The condemned blessed the spiritual advisor. Emmanuel Littlejohn's last private words to me, after I apologized for failing to stop it, were that we would never have made it as far as we did without me.

The executioners are inside the preference too. Everything the book claims about the murderer would collapse the moment it was denied to the men who kill him, the new murderers: the warden who reads, the officers who walk him down, the technician who finds the vein or digs for it, the doctor who listens for a heartbeat, the men behind the wall who push the plungers, the governor who let the clock run out. Every one of them is a killer by the state's own definition, and every one of them is preferred by God.

Abolitionists do not like this. I do not always like it. God does not stand with the man on the gurney against the man with the syringe. God stands with the man on the gurney, and from there reaches the man with the syringe. The grace does not come down on the executioner as a pardon. It comes across the room, from the murderer, as a gift the executioner did not necessarily ask for.

Abolition that leaves the executioner outside the preference is vengeance in a t-shirt, adorned with catchy slogans about progress of course. Condemned theology keeps no barriers to grace.

There is a door between the holding cell and the chamber, in every state. In Alabama, it looks like the door to a vault, and the guard knocks in a code. In Oklahoma, a hooded man stands beside it. In Missouri, there are so many doors that I lost count. It is the last threshold a man crosses on his own feet. Everything I know about God, I learned within twenty feet of that door.

The state built a temple to prove that there is a place God's preference cannot reach. It poured the floor. It set the glass. It wrote the hour on a warrant and hung a clock on the wall to keep it. Then it laid a murderer on the altar and waited for God to look away.

Fourteen times, in front of me, God did not look away. Fourteen times the man on the altar did the proving. He did it with two words through a plastic mask. He did it with a foot moving under a sheet. He did it with a hand he told me not to caress, with a verse handed back to the men holding him down, with a breath that kept preaching after the microphone was off, with a statement that came out in pieces. He did it for the warden who read. For the hands behind the wall. For the priest who signed the state's paper to be there and knelt on the state's floor to receive it.

The rest is the room. The door is open. The warden is reading. The man is walking. I am beside him.

If the room is not beyond the reach of God, then God did not build it. God is strapped inside it, arms flung open on the state's own table, and the walls that were poured to hold him have not held his love.

Part One

Before the Row

CHAPTER 1

The Victim

The names of the dead, said first.

THE DEAD NAMED FIRST

A.J. and Patsy Cantrell. Jose Guadalupe Tovar, Jessica Quinones, Audrey Brown, Frank Farias. Juli Busken. Edward Lee Williams. Elizabeth Sennett. Janet Moore, Sharath Pulluru. Angela Gilpin, Rodney Gilpin. Kenneth Meers. Clint Dobson. Carmen Gayheart. Gregory Huguley. Karen Spencer. Patricia Silvia. Vickie Swartout.

Those are the dead behind the fourteen. Behind two more men I was not permitted to stand beside: Karen Lane in Alabama, Patricia Gifford in Florida, a girl of eighteen whose body has never been found. The state kills in their names, and it has been careful to say so. Every warrant I have heard read over a strapped body carried a victim's name inside it. This book has no standing to walk into the chamber unless it can stand in front of those names first, without flinching, without moving past them to get to the man on the gurney.

So, I stop here. A ballerina was found floating in shallow water outside Norman. An elderly couple was murdered in their home in Depew. A pastor was killed inside his own church on a weekday morning. A woman was abducted from a grocery store parking lot in Florida. A young man was taped by the feet and burned alive while he begged to be beaten instead. A wife was shot at a family cookout while her mother, standing beside her, took the blast

in the face and lived. A teenage boy watched his mother die in his own home. A woman was beaten and stabbed in her home by a man who was paid a thousand dollars to do it. Four people were shot in a house in Houston. A woman was shot in a doorway in Jefferson City. Her husband died in the same doorway. A store clerk was shot during a robbery. A man was killed during a robbery in Alabama, and one of those who killed him was eighteen. A woman was killed in her apartment in Oklahoma City. The same day, a man was shot behind the counter of a store where he was filling in for a friend.

There are always bodies behind an execution, and the preference for the murderer begins by saying their names.

The Blood That Cries

The first thing God says to the first murderer is a question about the victim. *Where is your brother Abel?* (Genesis 4:9). God knew where Abel was, so the question was the demand that the killer say the name.

The second thing God says is about blood. *Listen; your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground!* (Genesis 4:10). This is the first theology of the victim in scripture, and it is not about the murderer at all. The blood has a voice, the ground carries it, and God hears it before God says one word about what will happen to Cain. The victim is heard first, completely, without the killer's version being taken.

Everything the state gets right, it gets from that verse: the blood cries, the cry goes up, someone must answer. A church that mumbles about forgiveness before it has heard the blood has not read Genesis. Neither has an abolition movement that lists the murderer's childhood before it says the victim's name.

In the weeks before Scott Eizember was executed, I read an interview with Debra Wyatt, the daughter of A.J. and Patsy Cantrell. She said she was living for his execution. I wrote her an open letter because I had no other way to reach her. I told her it made me sad that the execution was the thing she lived for, and that if Scott were executed I would grieve too. I did not tell her that her grief was misplaced. Her mother and father had been murdered in their home. The blood cried. She was the one who heard it every day of her life. The ground keeps better records than we do.

Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more (Jeremiah 31:15). The refusal is in the text. It is not corrected. God does not send a prophet to tell Rachel to get over it. There is a grief that should not be soothed, and the church has been in the business of soothing it for two thousand years. We have told the family that the loved one is in a better place. We have told them that forgiveness is required of them, that their anger is a sin. None of this is in Rachel. Rachel is permitted to refuse.

The state has learned to exploit that refusal. It has found the one thing the family cannot be talked out of, the rage that will not settle, and it has offered to satisfy it. The offer is the death warrant. You refuse comfort, so here is a corpse. At Scott's clemency hearing, family members told the board that his death was the only way God could bring them peace. They had been told for twenty years, by lawyers, by pastors, that the size of what they carried could be matched by his death. They believed it because everyone they trusted had said so.

Rachel's refusal is holy. The state's offer to satisfy it is not. Separating the two is the hardest work condemned theology has to do, and it has to do it in front of the family, not behind their backs.

The Rage God Keeps

The rage of the victim is not sinful: half the psalms are the victim's rage set to music. Break their teeth. Pour out your wrath. Let them be blotted from the book of the living. The church sings these on Sunday, then tells the murdered woman's mother that she needs to work on forgiveness, and the psalms do not say that. The psalms hand the rage to God and let God keep it.

The rage is relocated rather than extinguished. It goes up with the blood, to the one who heard the blood first, and it stays there. The psalmist does not pick up the stone. He asks God to.

The state has read the psalms as a to-do list. Where the psalmist handed the vengeance to God, the state took it back, handed it to a jury, and built a room where the family sits in rows to watch God's wrath performed by employees. The state did not steal the family's grief, which is theirs. It stole the vengeance, which was God's, then sold it back to the family as closure.

I have watched the sale close. Before Anthony Wainwright was executed, people lined up outside Florida State Prison with shirts, megaphones, streamers, cheering on the executioners. They believed they were there for Carmen Gayheart. I understood why. She was abducted. She was raped. She was murdered. But watching a man suffocate under a white sheet does not return a daughter. It does not even return the vengeance they came for. They went home as empty as they arrived. They had come to grasp what was never theirs.

Job's friends were right about almost everything. They believed in a moral universe, they sat with him seven days in silence, and then they opened their mouths, at which point God judged that they had not done rightly. Being right is not doing right. The church has been Job's friends to the victim's family: it has come with correct doctrine, it has explained, it has told a mother whose son was burned alive in a field that he is at peace now. Doctrine thrown at a grieving mother lands like a stone.

The Murdered God

The Christian claim about the victim is that God is the victim: nailed, numbered, hung between two men who were also being executed, under a sign that listed the charge. The blood that cries from the ground is God's blood.

This changes what it means to say God stands with the victim, because the standing is identity rather than sympathy from a safe distance. When I read John 8 to my guys, the woman caught in adultery, I make it clear that Jesus was in the dirt with her. If the stones had started flying, he was prepared to die with her. God did not stand outside the killing to judge it. God went to the ground where the blood was going to be.

God is with Carmen Gayheart in the woods. God is with Karen Spencer in the kitchen. God is with Gregory Huguley in the field while the fire is lit. There is no reservation in that presence. The next chapter will say that God is with the murderer completely too. That will sound like a contradiction. It is what it means for God to be present in a killing. God is on both sides of it, all the way in, never divided.

If God is the victim, then the victim has spoken about the possibility of another corpse, and the church has the transcript. *Father, forgive them, for they*

do not know what they are doing (Luke 23:34). That is the murdered God's first word from the place of murder, said while the killing was still going on, said about the men doing it.

Forgive them. Not kill them.

The state has never quoted it in a warrant, because it cannot. The whole rite of the second corpse depends on the victim wanting one, and the only victim whose will we know for certain did not. God asked for his killers' pardon before they had asked for anything. This does not obligate the victim's family to say the same, since they are permitted Rachel's refusal. It obligates the church, which claims to be the body of that victim, to stop telling the family that God's justice wants another corpse. The Lamb is the only one of the dead who has said what he wants done in his name.

Where does the victim's suffering go? The state says it goes onto a scale, to be answered with a death. Condemned theology says it is kept, in God, in a body that was itself murdered. The wounds of the risen Christ were still wounds. Thomas put his hand into them. Nothing about the resurrection erased the passion. The suffering of the victim was taken up, kept, shown, never balanced.

The resurrection is the victim's vindication. Look at whose death was overturned: a murdered man's. The state killed him, the Father raised him, and the first act of God after the murder of the Son was to undo the murder, not by punishing the murderers, but by raising the victim. The empire's answer to the killing of the Son would have been another crucifixion, while the Father's answer was an empty tomb.

I say this to the families as the only word I have that is not a lie: Carmen will be raised, Patty will be found, the Cantrells, Karen, Elizabeth, Gregory, Juli, all of them, raised. The state cannot raise anyone. The state can only add a name to the list.

A Preference That Does Not Divide

Here is the state's offer, without the robes. In exchange for the first corpse, it will produce a second one. It is dressed as justice, as closure, as respect for the victim, but at its core it is a trade, and the family is the buyer.

Two women stood before Solomon, each claiming the same living child. The king called for a sword, so each could have half. One woman said yes. If she could not have the child whole, no one would. The other gave him up so he could live. The state is the woman who said yes. It offers the family an even division, measured in the dead.

The preference for the murderer is a refusal of the state's offer on the victim's behalf, never a preference against the victim. Your dead are honored in the ground, in the voice of the blood, in the wounds God carries in a body that was itself murdered. Your dead are not honored by a gurney. The gurney is the state's monument to itself.

After Scott Eizember's execution, a woman named Lindsey Barnett stopped to speak to me outside the prison. She was the granddaughter of A.J. and Patsy Cantrell. She had been in the witness room to see the man who killed her grandparents die. I had been beside him telling him I loved him. We should have been enemies. She spoke anyway. For a moment, two people on opposite sides of a killing found the ground under both of them was the same ground. The blood was crying from it, and neither of us tried to explain the cry away.

The state needs a divided God, and it will not get one. When I stand beside the murderer in the chamber, I am not turning my back on the family behind the glass, I am refusing the thing they were sold. I hold Karen Spencer in the same hands that held Dusty, and I hold Carmen Gayheart in the hands that held Anthony. The hands are not big enough. They have never been big enough.

The blood in the kitchen still cries. The blood in the woods still cries. God has not stopped hearing it. God has not filed it. God has not handed it to a governor with a pen. God keeps it the way a mother keeps a child's voice after the child is gone: unfinished, hers. All I can do is trust the God who keeps the cry of the murdered without turning it into a warrant.

If God is the victim, then God is the one who heard the blood first, who answered it once with a stone rolled back, and who has never taken a second body as payment for the first.

Chapter 2

The Crime

The field, and the blood on the ground.

What They Did

Scott Eizember broke into the home of an elderly couple in Depew, Oklahoma, in 2003. A.J. and Patsy Cantrell died. He did it with a shotgun and with his hands. Casey McWhorter was eighteen when he took part in the killing of Edward Lee Williams during a robbery in Alabama in 1993. Kenneth Smith was paid a thousand dollars by a preacher to kill the preacher's wife. Elizabeth Sennett was beaten and stabbed in her home in 1988. Kenny denied being the one who struck the blows. No denial changes that a woman died for a thousand dollars in a plan he joined.

Steven Nelson took part in a robbery that left a pastor, Clint Dobson, dead in his church office. A church secretary was beaten and left for dead. Anthony Wainwright and another man abducted Carmen Gayheart from a grocery store parking lot in Lake City, Florida, in 1994. She was raped and murdered in the woods. Dusty Spencer killed his wife, Karen, in a house where her teenage son could see. William Silvia bought a shotgun, drove to a family cookout, killed Patricia Silvia, his estranged wife, and destroyed her mother's face. He heard voices his whole life. The voices did not buy the gun.

Michael Smith was convicted of killing Janet Moore in her apartment and Sharath Pulluru behind a store counter, in Oklahoma City, on the same day in 2002. David Hosier was convicted of shooting Angela Gilpin in a doorway in Jefferson City in 2009. Her husband Rodney died in the same doorway. Arthur Brown was convicted of the execution-style killing of four people in a Houston drug house in 1992. Anthony Sanchez was convicted of the abduction, rape and murder of Juli Busken, a dancer, in Norman in 1996. Anthony Boyd was convicted of taking part in the abduction of Gregory Huguley, who was taped at the feet, doused, burned alive over a drug debt in 1993. Emmanuel Littlejohn was convicted of the killing of Kenneth Meers during a convenience store robbery in 1992.

Jamaal Howard stole his grandfather's gun the night before, walked several blocks to the Chevron, shot Vickie Swartout in the chest, took $114 and a carton of cigarettes. The camera recorded it. That is the state's telling, and I do not dispute a word of it. His telling was different. He told a pen pal he was being killed because Vickie reached out and caught one of his bullets out of the air. In his mind there was no murder. The preference has to land on both tellings, and on the one mind that could only hold the second.

Five of them maintained their innocence to the end, in whole or in part, as did Michael in his last months. I have written all fourteen in the state's voice, because the state's voice is the one that was read over their bodies. No reader can accuse the book of hiding their convictions. I also want to make it clear that the state does not always tell the truth.

In the Field

When they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him (Genesis 4:8). The first murder in scripture is one line: no motive to speak of, no weapon described, a body in the dirt. The text does not soften it. It does not say Cain had a hard childhood. It gives us a man, his brother, a field, a killing.

Condemned theology must begin its account of the murderer there, in the field, at the moment of the act, with nothing subtracted. Everything the preference means depends on it. If God's preference is for a version of the man

with the killing removed, it is a preference for the innocent wearing a murderer's disguise, and the state would be right to laugh at that.

Then God marks him, to keep him alive rather than to shame him. Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance. The first murderer is the first person in scripture under God's explicit protection from being killed. He is exiled. He builds a city. His line produces the first musicians, the first metalworkers. The murderer's descendants gave the world the harp and the forge.

Read that from a cell. The men did, and they understood that the mark was not a brand but a refusal, God's refusal to let the blood of one killing call for the blood of another. The state has spent three thousand years scraping at the mark, one warrant at a time, and every warrant has failed, because the mark was never on the skin. It was on God.

As They Tell It

Some of the men told it worse than the state does. Scott did not pretend to a remorse he had trouble reaching. Casey talked about the murder as the thing that finally sent him to his grandmother's God, because there was nowhere else to go. William's repentance was total. It erased nothing, and he knew it.

Some told it as innocence. Arthur, Anthony Sanchez, Anthony Boyd, Emmanuel, David. I believed them. I have written campaigns for each of them. But this book is not their appeal. If I built condemned theology on their innocence, I would have built it on the same ground the state stands on: whether the evidence proves the man guilty. Innocence may be the strongest argument for a stay. It is no argument at all for the preference, which needs the man to be a murderer and needs God to move toward him anyway.

There is a kind of murderer the movement does not put on billboards. The man who killed children. The man who raped before he killed. The man whose file the lawyers close before they throw up. I have sat across from a man in Texas whose violence poured out of him in a visitation room until I had to protect myself from something in the room, and I reported to the people trying to save his life that I had never seen that level of evil in someone. Then I stood outside the prison in protest when they killed him, because killing is evil no matter who does the killing.

Condemned theology has to cover him, or it is a theology of the sympathetic murderer, which is only the bar lowered. The preference goes to the bottom, and the bottom is the man no one defends, not the man redeemed. I do not know how to say that God prefers him. I know that if God does not, then God did not prefer Cain either, and the whole of scripture after the fourth chapter of Genesis is a clerical error.

The state names the man by his act: murderer. The movement fights that name. It says he is more than the worst thing he ever did. The sentence is true and it is the wrong sentence, because it concedes the state's premise, that the worst thing is a stain to be weighed against a life. Condemned theology does not argue about the weight. It says yes, murderer, then it says that this is who God prefers, the man named by his act, not a man reconstructed from his better days. The preference does not land on Scott the wounded boy whose mother killed herself when he was eight months old, though that boy is real. It lands on Scott who killed the Cantrells. It does not land on Dusty the Marine, though that man is real. It lands on Dusty who killed Karen. The movement wants a sympathetic client. God wants Cain.

Numbered with the Transgressors

The prophet said the servant *was numbered with the transgressors* (Isaiah 53:12). The King James text of Mark says the prophecy was fulfilled when they crucified him between two criminals: *And the scripture was fulfilled, which saith, And he was numbered with the transgressors* (Mark 15:28, KJV). Numbered. Counted among them. Put on the same list, under the same charge, on the same hill, by the same state, so that anyone walking past that afternoon saw three convicts dying and could not have told you which one was God.

The crime forces a Christology. God did not sympathize with the guilty from a distance, God was numbered with them. *For our sake God made the one who knew no sin to be sin* (2 Corinthians 5:21). Made him sin, the thing itself, on the list, so that there would be no list God had not been on.

The church has spent centuries insisting that the charge over his head was false, and it was. But the numbering was true. He let the count stand. He did not ask to be moved to a separate hill for the innocent. He died on the

murderers' hill, under the murderers' method, in the murderers' company, and he promised one of them paradise before he promised it to any of his friends.

This is how the innocent on the row are counted. Arthur said Texas was killing an innocent man, and the state did not move him to a separate hill: he lived under the name murderer, he died under it, because the warrant does not say alleged. Christ went where the name put him. The preference goes there too, it goes to every man who carries the name, before anyone sorts the guilty from the innocent. The innocent man on the row stands closest to the place Christ stood: counted guilty, under a warrant that reads a crime over a body that did not commit it. The church does not need to settle which men are innocent before it goes to them. Christ did not wait for the charge to be corrected.

There is a suffering that belongs to the murderer, and the church has never known what to do with it, because it is guilty suffering. Cain's cry: *My punishment is greater than I can bear!* (Genesis 4:13). David's cry: *my sin is ever before me* (Psalm 51:3). The suffering of having killed, carried for thirty years in a cell, is real suffering. It is not the same as the victim's. It is still suffering.

Guilt is a wound too, and Christ took that one as well. He did not only suffer as the innocent victim, he suffered as the one on whom the guilt of the act was laid, so that the murderer's particular agony, the one no one has sympathy for, was inside the passion too. Dusty carried Karen for thirty-four years, Casey carried Edward Lee Williams from eighteen to forty-nine, and whatever that carrying is, God carried it on Friday, on the murderers' hill, under the charge.

The Lost Sheep

Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? (Luke 15:4). The parable never says what the sheep did: it says it was lost. The church has hung the whole parable on the last clause about the sinner who repents, as if the going-after were conditional on the repenting, which it is not. The shepherd goes first. The sheep is on his shoulders before anyone has said sorry.

Now put the killer in the parable. The lost sheep is the one who did it. The ninety-nine are the ones who did not. The shepherd leaves the innocent in the open and goes after Cain. The state reads the parable in reverse. It gathers the ninety-nine into a witness room, then goes after the one with a needle. Both go after the one. Only one of them comes back with him alive.

While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Romans 5:6). Before we improved, not after, and the timing is the doctrine. The preference comes before the murderer's repentance, before his crime, so the act did not create the preference and cannot cancel it. The state treats the crime as the first fact about the man, then the last. The gospel reverses the order: the preference is the first fact, the thing the crime walked into.

Moses saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, looked both ways, killed him, hid him in the sand. No trial. No repentance recorded. Forty years later, the law came through him. The commandment against killing was carried down the mountain by a killer. Grace did more than reach Moses: it used him, which is the difference between a God who forgives murderers and a God who prefers them. The first cleans the man up before employing him. The second hands the tablets to the hands that hid the body.

David saw Bathsheba, took her, arranged for her husband to die at the front. He wrote the order himself. It was not a crime of passion. It was administration. Then the psalms. *The Lord is my shepherd* (Psalm 23:1). I have read the twenty-third psalm in every chamber I have entered, with my hand on a foot or a shoulder or a head. I read it to Kenny three times, softly, making the cross on his shins, before I stepped back so the nitrogen could start. The words that steadied those men on the gurney were written by a man who had killed with a letter. Most of what the church sings came through the mouth of a murderer.

The act cannot be undone, and that is the ground grace starts from, because it is the only ground there is. The Cantrells are dead, Carmen is dead, Karen is dead, and nothing in this book raises them. Nothing the state did on any of the fourteen dates raised them either. The state's theology begins from the idea that the act can be balanced, while condemned theology begins from the idea that it cannot, and that God's preference is what God does with a thing that cannot be balanced. God does not weigh Cain against Abel. God marks Cain and hears Abel, both, all the way, without division.

I have stood in the field at the moment the state tried to balance it, and every time the field stayed the way it was. The dead stayed dead. The murderer became a second corpse. The scale did not move, because there was no scale. There was only a room, a man on a table, and one thing the state had not planned for. The man on the table was the one God had gone out to get.

Chapter 3

The Trial

The first sanctuary.

Who They Were

Who were the fourteen when they were tried? Poor, every one of them. Black or brown, several. Damaged in ways the jury never fully heard, all of them. Represented, in most cases, by lawyers who did not believe in them or did not try.

Dusty Spencer's jury voted seven to five for death. Five people looked at his whole life, the father who raped him, the alcohol he started drinking at fourteen to survive it, the Marine Corps, and said let him live. Under the law Florida has since adopted, that vote could not send anyone to the gurney. The Florida Supreme Court threw the sentence out for errors. On remand, no new jury was seated. A judge alone, from the existing record, sentenced him to die. The state carried out, in 2026, a sentence no jury in Florida could hand down today.

William Silvia's jury recommended death eleven to one. Later he stood up in a courtroom and asked to fire his lawyers, to waive every appeal he had, forever. The judge found him competent. Nobody stood up to say that the man had heard voices his whole life, that the voices were in the room with him while he made himself eligible for a warrant.

Kenny Smith's jury voted eleven to one for life. The judge overrode them.

Those are the men the state dressed in white and called worthy of final judgment. Dusty, by a vote the law no longer accepts. Will, by voices no one else in the courtroom could hear. Kenny, over the heads of the twelve who heard his case. The state calls it a trial. I have seen where the trial ends, and the end has straps...whether they are supposed to fit or not.

The First Sanctuary

The state's liturgy begins in a courtroom, years before the chamber, with robes, oaths, a raised bench, where everyone in it swears, everyone stands when the robed man enters, the bailiff calls the room to order the way a deacon calls a congregation to worship, the gavel falls like borrowed thunder. Then a verdict is pronounced, in the name of the people, by people who would be ashamed to say they were pronouncing it in the name of God. The shame is the tell, because no one is ashamed of a schedule. They are ashamed because they know what a sentence of death is: a sacrifice, announced from a bench, with the people standing in for a God they had sworn to on the way in and have not met.

They are. A death sentence is a claim about what a life is worth, and a claim about worth is a claim about God, which no one has authority to make but God. The courtroom knows it, which is why it dresses like a church, with the robe for a vestment, the oath for a creed, the gavel for a censer. The state has built a cathedral and told itself it has built a courthouse.

Benjamin Cole could not stop shouting Bible verses into the phone when I first spoke with him. He believed he would receive a messianic proclamation on the date the state had set for his execution. He often thought he was in paradise already. He was found competent to be tried, then competent to be killed. Then he was killed. The state had dressed a man that ill in the vestments of a defendant, then a condemned man, then competent, and at no point had the costume fit.

Twelve Who Swore They Could Kill

Capital juries are death qualified. Before the trial begins, every juror is asked whether they could vote to kill the defendant. Anyone who says no is excused. The twelve who remain are the twelve who swore, under oath, that they could.

No other trial in America is built this way. The death penalty is the only sentence for which the state assembles, in advance, a congregation that has already confessed the creed.

I sat in front of one at Scott Eizember's clemency hearing. I said it is always going to be evil to kill a child of God. I asked where God was in a process like that. One of the original prosecutors answered that God was present, because God had always been present in our democracy. He meant it. He was a man of warped faith, standing in what he took for a sanctuary, believing the state's liturgy was God's. Nobody had told him what else our democracy had been present for. The trail out of Georgia. The auction block. The orange cloud over the villages. The missile through the roof of a school. God was present at every one of those too. Never where the prosecutor was standing.

After guilt comes the penalty phase, where the defense is permitted to tell the jury who the man is. Here the childhood comes in, the abuse, the illness, the war. Here the jury is asked to weigh a life. It is also where the state's lie about weighing is exposed, because the jury cannot do it. No one can. Twelve strangers are asked, in an afternoon, to put a murdered woman on one side and a raped child who grew into a drunk who grew into a Marine who grew into a killer on the other, then say which is heavier. The task is impossible. The impossibility is the point. The penalty phase exists so the state can say the weighing was done.

The Creed

The sentence is the state's creed. It is read aloud in the courtroom, decades before it is read over the gurney, and it says one thing: this man is beyond God's reach.

It does not use those words. It says death. It says the aggravating factors outweigh the mitigating. But the court has said, with its robes on, that there is nothing left in this man that is owed protection. That his mark has been scraped off. That whoever kills him will suffer no vengeance at all.

Before Arthur Brown was executed, the employees of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice kept asking me the same question. Is Arthur saved? They asked it in the hallway, in the waiting area, in the doorway. They were not asking about their own participation. They were asking about his destination. I gave the same answer every time. Saved from what? You are about to kill him. The question came from the creed. They had been told by a court that Arthur was beyond God's reach, and they wanted his spiritual advisor to confirm it. The creed had done its work: it had made them the arbiters of where God stopped.

God does not stop.

There was a trial once in which the crowd was asked to choose between an innocent man and a murderer. Barabbas had killed during an insurrection, and the text does not soften him. The governor offered the choice, the crowd chose the killer, and the church has read this as the crowd's crime, which it is. But look at what God did with it. God let the choice stand. Barabbas walked out, unrepentant, without a hearing, because a crowd said so, and God did not intervene to correct the verdict. The innocent one went to the cross in the killer's place.

It is the only capital trial in scripture at which God was the defendant, and its outcome was that the murderer went free. The substitution ran the other direction from the one the state performs. The state puts the murderer on the cross so the innocent can feel avenged, while God put the innocent on the cross and sent the murderer home.

The Trial of God

Every capital trial reenacts the first one: arrested at night, heard by the priests, accused by witnesses who could not agree, convicted of blasphemy, handed to a reluctant governor, offered to the crowd, sentenced. The church has read it as history, when it is a template, and every capital trial since has kept the same order of service.

The charge was theological: he made himself equal with God. The court sentenced God to death for being God, and the court was right about the facts. A death-qualified court with the incarnation for a defendant convicts the truth. Caiaphas said the doctrine aloud: *it is better for you to have one man die*

for the people than to have the whole nation destroyed (John 11:50). The state's creed in its purest form, spoken by a priest. One for many. The second corpse in exchange for the safety of the keepers of the first.

Pilate washed his hands. *I am innocent of this man's blood; see to it yourselves* (Matthew 27:24). History has never remembered him as innocent. It remembers him as the man who held the power to stop the execution and washed instead. The governor who signs the warrant is Pilate. The board that declines clemency is Pilate. Every hand in the chain that says only signed, only ordered, only followed, is a hand under the same water.

Condemned theology takes the basin away. There is no water that cleans the hand that could have stopped it. But the same theology holds the governor inside the preference. Pilate was inside it. The one he sentenced said father, forgive them, and did not exempt the man who washed. The trial of God ends with the judge forgiven by the defendant. That is the only verdict in scripture that stands.

Condemned theology makes a claim the same court would call blasphemy. It says the truth is in the murderer's flesh, that the man on the gurney is where God is standing. It is one thing to say God loves the murderer. It is another to say God is in him, as flesh, under the sentence. The first is mercy. The second is the incarnation, applied where the church has refused to apply it. When a theology is accused of putting God where God cannot be, it is usually because it has put God where God said God would be.

The state's verdict stands, the fourteen are dead, and no theology unwrites a certificate. Every one of them was told, in the false sanctuary, that he was beyond reach. Then the door opened, they walked out of the courtroom onto the row, and the row is where the creed was put to the test.

Three decades is a long time to be beyond reach, and the creed had to hold every night of it. It had to hold at three in the morning, when a man is awake in cinder block with nothing but his crime, and it had to hold through every warrant that came, every one that was stayed. It did not hold. The verdict stood. The creed did not.

Part Two

Before the Chamber

Chapter 4

The Row

The parish the church abandoned.

The Duration

Death row is a duration before it is a place. Dusty Spencer spent thirty-four years there for a killing that took a minute. Emmanuel Littlejohn spent thirty-two. Kenny Smith spent thirty-five, long enough to become a grandfather behind the wall. Casey McWhorter went in at eighteen and came out at forty-nine, on a gurney. The state calls this the appeals process. It is a sentence inside the sentence: decades in a cell, waiting for a date.

Somewhere in those years the killer dies and someone else takes his place. The state does not care which man it straps down. It needs only the name on the warrant to match. But the row knows. The row has watched a man become someone his own victim's family would not recognize, and the row has no way to tell anyone, because no one asks the row.

The Glass

Most of what I know about the fourteen I learned through the portals the machine allowed. A visitation booth in Texas with a grate the size of pinholes. A booth in Missouri where a guard's hand on your back ends the visit. A phone

that goes dead without warning. Letters. Dozens of letters. For close to a year, a phone call every night at eight with Anthony Sanchez.

Arthur Brown and I met a week before he died, after a six-hour drive from Little Rock to Livingston. I expected a hardened criminal. I got a smile. He wanted to talk about home. I told him the afterlife was laying in a huge gelatin of electric love for all eternity, which he thought was beautiful, and then he said he prayed it would be a little longer before he found out. When it was time to go, I put my hand on the glass and gave him a blessing: see the light, become the light, be the light. The last thing I saw before his execution date was a smile. He already knew the light.

David Hosier's favorite verse was 2 Timothy 4:7, the fight fought, the race finished. The day before his execution, I read it to him through the glass with his name in it. We were both crying. I told him he would not walk alone. A guard's hand guided me out of the booth. I turned around, blessed him through the window in the name of the God who made him, redeemed him and would never leave him. The prison was colder when I left. I felt colder too.

The glass is what the state believes about the row. It says these men are dangerous, that they must be seen and not touched, that the body is the state's property which the outside world may look at but not reach. Then at the end, it lets a preacher through the glass to put his hand on a foot while the state kills the man. The glass comes down only for the killing.

Leaning in, Steven Nelson asked me to touch his finger. The grate was pinhole size. I put my finger to the grate and pressed as hard as I could. Finally, I touched his finger. It was the first time he'd touched someone he loved from the outside in over a decade. When I pulled my finger back, I felt the pain. Blood had collected on my fingertip. I didn't care. I would have pressed harder if I could.

It stays up for everything else, and a man no one has been allowed to touch is a man everyone has been taught to fear. The glass is what makes us think they were worth killing in the first place.

In Texas, I knew Jamaal Howard through the glass for a year. Two hours at a stretch, his face on the other side, a hand flat against the pane. In the middle of a sentence he would point at a corner of the room and talk to whatever stood there. Nothing stood there. I did not argue with the corner. A conversation with him was a bucket with holes in it: you poured, it ran out the bottom, you

poured again. Some days he knew he was on death row. Some days he did not. The glass came down for him once, on the day Texas killed him, and by then there was nothing left to pass through it but a prayer.

Who They Became

Kenny Smith helped lead worship services. Anthony Boyd spent years teaching the men around him about hope. Anthony Sanchez painted. He gave me a picture of a dove that looked like it was spoiling for a fight, and it hangs where I can see it when I write. Scott Eizember, who had pushed every woman out of his life since the day his mother killed herself, reconnected with his daughter in the last weeks. I watched a very angry man grow a human side.

None of this argues that they had earned life, only that life had found them whether we wanted it to or not.

The row forces one doctrine: the preference does not wait for the chamber. If grace showed up only at the end, on the gurney, it would look like a last-minute rescue, the church's favorite story. It shows up instead in year twelve, in a cell, while a man learns to read, in a letter from a daughter, in a worship service led by a man who was paid a thousand dollars to kill a woman.

In his last days, I asked Arthur Brown what he thought of the faith-based program Texas runs on death row. He said it was not about faith, it was about the manipulation of desperate people, and that he did not fear death enough to play games with God like that. They should not kill him because they should not kill him, he said, not because they thought he was a dog that had finally learned the right tricks.

The theology of the row is in that sentence, and it came from a man Texas counted with the murderers. Grace on the row performs for no clemency board. God did not wait for Arthur to perform, God lived in that cell with him the entire time.

Where He Said He Would Be

What looks like charity to a prisoner is an audience with God, who has hidden himself in the cell so that he can be visited there. The visitor thinks he is bringing something. He is being received. The righteous in the parable are surprised because they thought they had been kind to a prisoner. They learn

they had been standing in the very presence of God. Every visit through the glass was an audience. It took me years to learn who was granting it.

It also means the incarnation is on the row before any warrant. Christ does not arrive at the execution: he has been in the cell for thirty years. The gospel gives Jesus thirty years of obscurity for three of preaching, Nazareth, a trade, nothing recorded, so the Word made flesh spent most of his incarnate life waiting, unseen, in a small place, before the state took notice of him.

The row is Nazareth: decades in a cell, doing ordinary things, reading, painting doves, leading a small congregation, becoming a grandfather. The incarnation on the row is long rather than dramatic. The state sentenced a man in 1993, the Word took flesh in that man over the following thirty years, in the ordinary way, and the man the state finally killed was one in whom the incarnation had been going on for three decades unnoticed. The state does not track that: it tracks the appeals, it files paperwork waiting for its pound of flesh. Nazareth was not in the empire's records either.

Half the New Testament was written from custody or to people facing it. Paul wrote to the Philippians in chains, so the church's most-read letters are prison correspondence. The row writes letters too: Emmanuel's block capitals, Greg Hunt's emails, which I promised him I would share, letters that arrive on the backs of forms with a return address that is a number. Why is the church so comfortable with the words of murderers in scripture, yet so afraid of the words of the murderers among us? The two are the same genre. One has a canon, while the other arrives in the mail.

The Parish the Church Abandoned

The row is a parish. It has members, a schedule, funerals, arguments, a shared text and a great deal of prayer, while what it does not have is a formal church, because the church kept its distance. So, the condemned created their own.

The parish also has women in it.

Lisa Jo Chamberlin is the only woman on Mississippi's death row. She has been there since 2006. When she and her partner were caught, the state needed a mastermind. It looked at the two of them and chose her. In 2018 the state let him live. It has not let her.

At Parchman, a man on death row with a clean record earns a deck of cards, a garden, other faces. Her clean record earns her a cell by herself. I have visited prisons across the country. Nothing in them is worse than her situation. She is a parish of one. There was a season when she considered signing the papers that would let the state kill her sooner. She did not sign. The state gave her a cell and a wait. Twenty years in, she still chooses the wait over the paper. She chooses it alone. No one in Mississippi is allowed to choose it with her.

In Arizona, Shawna Forde once led an armed group on the border. She was convicted in the killing of Raul Flores and his nine-year-old daughter, Brisenia, shot dead in her own home. I expected a monster. What I found was a woman in a prison uniform building programs for the women locked up around her. In many ways, she is their pastor. There are no easy answers. Brisenia is still nine. Shawna is still convicted of murder. I am still going. Jesus does not ask for our preference of destination. He just takes you to the cell you would have walked past, then asks you to stay.

Greg Hunt was the pastor of Alabama's row, though he refused the title. On our first call, he preached at me for an hour, stopping only to reset the prison line. Each week he led a small congregation of men who had been to hell and back, most by their own doing, Greg among them. He told me God wants us to thrive wherever we are, even if we are in hell. I told him I did not believe in hell.

We had fierce theological differences. We loved each other anyway, sometimes because of them. Alabama killed him with nitrogen in June of 2025 for the 1988 murder of Karen Lane. Florida killed Anthony Wainwright the same evening. Two states set the same hour. Two men. One of me. The state made me choose which Christ to be with. I was not in the room with Greg. My deep regret has not let me put him down since.

When the church abandoned the parish, the parish ordained itself. No bishop laid hands on anyone: the men in the cells on either side did, through the bars. There is precedent. The first church met in prisons, was led by people the state had marked for death, wrote its letters from cells. The row is closer to the first-century church than any building I have ever preached in.

The church counts its empty pews. It should count the row. The most faithful congregation I know of meets in cells, and the state is the only one

allowed to end a membership. Anyone worried about church growth should study the one congregation only a gurney has ever managed to shrink.

When Benjamin Cole, who believed he would rise on the third day, needed someone to leave his property to, he called me. I answered. He told me I was the one who did. His life came to me in five boxes: religious tracts, hair clippings, old food, rags, pages of numbers no one could read. I laid it all out on my floor at three in the morning. A man who thought he was the messiah, executed by a state that decided he understood what was happening to him, left me his trash. For months after, every time I walked past the pile, I could hear a homily about a love that gathers everything in, the trash included, into a parish with no state and no date. Benjamin was preaching from the grave.

Chapter 5

The Warrant

The call to worship.

The Clipboard

The killing starts with a signature. Weeks before the chamber, in a room the condemned man will never see, someone writes a name on a page and puts a date beside it. Nothing bleeds, nothing moves, but somewhere a clock has started, and the man it counts toward is in a cell.

The warrant arrives on a clipboard. In Florida, the governor signs it personally. Ron DeSantis signed William Silvia's on the seventeenth of July, 2026, setting the execution date for the eighteenth of August at six in the evening. In Oklahoma, the Court of Criminal Appeals sets the date and the governor watches the clock. In Alabama, the governor sets a window, a stretch of hours in which the state may kill, so that the courts cannot run the time out.

The paper is dull by design. It reads like a form: it names the man, the crime, the statute, the date, and it says nothing about God. But a warrant is a creed, and its reading, weeks later, over a strapped body, is the moment the creed is proclaimed aloud, so the day the warrant is signed is the day the liturgy starts. A death warrant is the only document in our laws that schedules the end of a human being. Every other order concerns what a man may do or where he may go. The warrant concerns whether he will exist.

I wrote to the Governor of Florida before Dusty's execution and said the part nobody says: the execution is designed so that no one did it. The governor only signed. The warden only followed the warrant. The team only followed the order. Every hand in the chain comes out clean, and the man is still dead. I asked him to walk into the room and put his own hand on the thing he ordered. He should not have the luxury of looking away. The most theological document in our laws is signed by a man who will never smell the bleach, hear the gurgling or taste the regret of what he has seen.

The Mark

Set the warrant beside Genesis. *Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance* (Genesis 4:15). The first murderer was marked so that he would not be killed. The first act of God after the first murder was a protection rather than a sentence.

The warrant is the state's attempt to remove the mark. Every one says, in effect, that this man is not under God's protection, that his killing will carry no vengeance, that a court has lifted the mark. The state has no authority to lift it. The mark was never the state's to give. It was placed by the one who heard the blood. A court or a governor can sign a paper. It cannot unsign the grace of God.

The men understood this. Anthony Boyd, in the weeks before his date, talked about the execution hanging over his head as unreal, as constant dread. The scholars call it the death row phenomenon. He called it torment. The torment was the mark being scraped at, day by day, with a date. A man knows when the thing that has kept him alive is being pried off. He feels it in his body before the paper ever arrives.

Cain's descendant Lamech boasted to his wives: *I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold* (Genesis 4:23–24). The first escalation. The first man to take God's protection of the murderer and turn it into a license for his own vengeance. The warrant is Lamech's boast in the state's hand. It takes the mark, which was a limit on vengeance, and reads it as a warrant for vengeance. You killed, so we will kill. Seventy-sevenfold, because the state does not kill one man

for one man. It kills him after thirty years of caging him, after the row has finished making him someone else. It kills the boy and the man at once.

The Warrant against the Son

So, from that day on they planned to put him to death (John 11:53). The gospel marks the moment the warrant against the Son was signed: after the raising of Lazarus, in a council, by men who decided that one death was expedient. He knew. He set his face toward the city. He walked toward the date.

The Son lived under a warrant, Herod's first, when he was an infant and the state killed every boy in Bethlehem to be sure of him, then the council's. The incarnate God spent his life under a death warrant the state kept trying to execute, and he did not evade it. He did not use the power he had to make the date disappear, he let the warrant stand and walked into it. Herod signed first, the council signed next, and every governor since has signed a warrant the Son already carried.

What a date does to a man, the gospel records God feeling. *Now is my soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save me from this hour* (John 12:27, KJV). The Son under the warrant, in the days before, with the plot known and the date closing. The church softens this into a rhetorical question, when it was what a date does, felt by God, in a body.

The mark of Cain was God's protection on the first murderer. Christ carried marks too. *So marred was his appearance, beyond human semblance* (Isaiah 52:14). The marks on Christ were not protection: they were the marks the state made on the body it had decided to kill, and here the two marks meet. The mark on Cain said: do not kill him. The marks on Christ said: they did. The first mark God put on the murderer, to stop the killing, while the second set God took in his own flesh, when the killing came anyway. Christ answered Lamech. He stood where the vengeance fell, so that now the marks on every executed body are marks on him.

The gospel of John counts down. *My time has not yet come* (John 7:6). Then: *The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified* (John 12:23). The whole gospel is a man under a date, watching it approach, then, at the end, calling the hour his glory. The date the state sets is, in the gospel's grammar, the hour. The hour is not only the state's. *And I, when I am lifted up from the*

earth, will draw all people to myself (John 12:32). He said this of the cross, the state's method, at the state's hour.

What a Date Does

Kenny Smith, in the weeks before the first nitrogen execution in history, could not keep food down. Nausea. Nightmares. Panic attacks. He had already survived one execution: in 2022 Alabama had tried to kill him with a needle, kept him strapped to the gurney for hours while the team dug for a vein, then given up when the warrant ran out at midnight. Now the state had chosen him to be the first on earth to die by a mask. When I sat with him on the phone at night, he did not want to talk about the symptoms. He wanted to talk about things beyond belief. So, I stopped trying to solve his body. I sat with him in the presence.

Michael Smith texted me at 2:48 in the morning on the last night of his life. He was trying to make his lawyers file a final appeal. He was scared. I did not answer, because I had fallen asleep. I had prayed for hours, God stop this insanity, God draw near to Michael, less requests than demands, and then my body quit. When I woke to the text, I sat on the edge of the bed and cried. The words of Christ in the garden had come to me, and I was asleep.

A date turns every night into Gethsemane, and no one keeps watch who does not also sleep.

Jamaal did not know what his date meant. Texas had set October 7, and he could not have told you what October 7 was for. When I told him that Tennessee had failed to kill Christa Pike the week before with the drug Texas would use on him, he had not heard of her, and he did not know what drugs I meant. He thought about it and said that if the drugs did not work, they would just shoot him in the head. A date did to him what it does to every man, except that it did it without his knowing. The warrant counted down in a room he could not see into.

A date does this to a family: it forces them to choose between watching or not watching. Either choice is a wound. The state calls this respect for the family. It is a second sentence, served in a different room.

I did not sleep the night before Dusty Spencer died. I lay down like a man lies down on a fault line. At eleven I was still telling myself I would sleep. By

midnight I had stopped lying. At one, I thought about how little I knew him: seventy-four, a Marine, measured for the gurney like a man for a suit. At two, the questions came in their robes, pacing like prosecutors, asking why I would empty myself for a stranger. I gave them the confession they wanted. There is no other way to be moral. There is no other way to know God. At three, the hour of abandonment, I stood at the window. The parking lot was empty. The road was empty. Somewhere down that road a man sat in a cell with seconds taunting him.

There is a name for what the date does to the one who stays awake. It is the wound you take when you stand in the presence of something your soul knows is evil and cannot stop it, a wound to the conscience rather than the body. It is the monster that moves in once the witnessing is done. It does not roar. It waits.

The Stay

Sometimes the date moves, because a court grants a stay or a governor blinks, and the warrant that was going to be the last word becomes a piece of paper with a date crossed out.

After Scott Eizember, the campaign we had waged against the Department of Corrections, the lawsuit, the press, the political pressure, created enough stress that the Oklahoma attorney general filed a motion to slow the schedule of executions. Shortly before Scott died, I had told him our fight would help the other guys on the row. He took satisfaction in that. The men behind him got more time, because we had made a murderer's execution so difficult.

A stay, theologically, is the mark holding for one more season. It is God's sevenfold refusal, doing its work through lawyers, clerks, a politician who would rather wait than fight. The state treats a stay as a delay. The row treats it as a resurrection, temporary, unearned, real.

Chapter 6

The Search

The binding of the offering.

The Strip

On the day of an execution, the state takes possession of the body. The man is moved from his cell to a holding cell beside the chamber. Before he goes, he is stripped, searched, inventoried, dressed in whites. The protocol says it is for security. What a man about to be killed might do with a hidden object, on his way to a gurney with a squad of guards around him, no protocol explains. The search finds no weapons. It is the state's first hand on the offering. Strip, search, list, dress: the state vests its offering the way a church vests a priest, without a prayer.

The advisor is searched too. I remove the robe. I walk through the metal detector. I spin around. In Alabama, before Anthony Boyd, a guard began to question the sacramental elements I was bringing in: a small amount of oil, wine, a wafer in clear plastic. They made me pour part of each into an evidence container. I poured the wine and smelled the sharp tang of it. Then they patted every inch of my body. I felt violated. It was grotesque, absurd, unholy. It let me return to Anthony, so I did it. The state frisks the priest for God. It finds oil.

Every item the man has is listed, his Bible, his photographs, his letters, and what he cannot give away is boxed for whoever he named. The inventory is the state's anthropology: a man is what can be listed, property, effects, a number. When Ben Cole's boxes came open on my floor, the state's Benjamin Cole was a list, accurate in every line, nothing like him. He was not in the boxes.

Kenny Smith was strapped down by twelve guards and one state official. He whispered that he was giving them hell, and he smiled. The state had to send a squad to move a man who weighed less than any two of them, because the state understood what it was moving. It was moving a man under a mark. It took twelve pairs of hands to scrape at it. The mark held.

The Whites

They dress him in white. Every state. A white shirt, or a white sheet pulled up to the chin so that the arms with the lines in them are hidden. The witnesses see a face on a pillow and a white shape below it. In Texas, when Arthur Brown saw me come in, he started to shake his foot, and I could see the white sheet moving fast. It was the only thing he could move. It was his way of telling me to stay strong.

The church has a name for a body in white on a table. It is the body at baptism, at burial. White is the color of the ones who have come through. The state did not choose it for that reason. The state chose it because white shows nothing, because a white sheet makes a strapped man look like a patient.

But the vestment tells the truth. The state has dressed the man as the offering. In Florida, William Silvia shivered against the leather in the cold, and I watched the color leave his face under the white: lips, then cheeks, then forehead, the blue of drowning.

The white is there so the blue will show.

Two Hands on the Body

The state's hands on the body say what the state thinks a body is. They say it is property. They say it is dangerous. They say it must be searched, listed, moved, bound, displayed, and that none of those things require its consent. The hands are practiced more than cruel, most of the time. In Oklahoma, the strap-down team scattered when they saw me at the top of the steel steps, because they fear

their work might reach the sun. Practiced hands that are afraid of light are hands that know what they are holding.

The advisor's hands say something else. In Missouri, I put my hand on David Hosier's shoulder and left it there the entire time, while the poison passed through the tube, while his skin went from grey to ash. In Alabama, I anointed Casey McWhorter's forehead with oil, made the cross over him again, then again, until the captain pulled me back.

Two sets of hands on one body: the state's, to inventory, and the church's, to bless, the second permitted only under conditions, one hand, one place, no more than the warden allows. The state's hands admit that the body is heavy, that it is dangerous to the very end, that it is an offering, in the white they dress it in, though they do not know to whom. The church knows. It has not come to say so.

Moses, David, Paul

What is a human being, that the state may strip him and list him? Scripture answers with murderers.

Moses killed a man and hid him in the sand. Then Moses was the one through whom God said that a human being is made in the image of God, that no one is to touch the man with the mark. The image of God was declared by a man who had struck the image down, and the authorship is no accident. A human being is the one God keeps choosing after the act, not before, when he is still innocent and easy to love. Moses was chosen at the bush forty years after the sand.

David was a man after God's own heart, and David was a murderer. Both are in the text, and the church has spent centuries trying to put the second fact where it would not disturb the first. It does not go anywhere. A human being is no ledger, and God keeps none. God did not put David's kingship on one side of a scale and Uriah's blood on the other. God did both things: sent Nathan to name the crime, then kept the man. Naming and keeping. The state can only name, because it has no way to keep.

Paul held the coats at a stoning and approved. Then the church's whole theology of the body came through him: the body as temple, the body raised.

The man who had watched a body broken by stones wrote that the body was where God lives.

Together, the three finish the anthropology of condemned theology. The murderer is the human's clearest instance rather than its exception, because in him the choosing has nothing else to rest on. There is no innocence to justify it. There is the act, the blood, the mark, the choosing. Nothing else.

The Body of God Stripped

They stripped him. The gospel does not soften it. They took his clothes, divided them, cast lots for the tunic. The Word made flesh was searched, undressed, inventoried by soldiers who wanted his garments, then displayed. The incarnate body was the state's property for one afternoon, and the state handled it the way it handles bodies: strip, list, bind, hang.

The deeper claim is that the human body is the one God chose to wear, so that when the state strips the body, it is stripping the vesture of God. *Destroy this temple*, he said of his body, *and in three days I will raise it up* (John 2:19). The soldiers heard a threat against a building. He meant the flesh they were about to search. Soldiers threw dice for his tunic. Alabama poured my wine into an evidence jar. It is the same lot, drawn again.

The search assumes the body is finished. It lists what is on it because the state expects to dispose of it. The gospel assumes the opposite. *It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power* (1 Corinthians 15:43). The body the state strips and bags is a seed. The state's inventory of Christ was complete on Friday: garments divided, body released, tomb sealed, guard posted. On Sunday, the inventory was wrong.

The hymn says that *though he was in the form of God*, he *emptied himself, taking the form of a slave* (Philippians 2:6–7), obedient to the point of death, death on a cross, the slave's execution, the state's most degrading method. The emptying stopped there, at the executed slave. So the whites, the inventory, the twelve guards, the evidence container, are the form of a slave, worn again by the Word, in Alabama. *Therefore God also highly exalted him* (Philippians 2:9). The therefore follows the emptying. God did not exalt the Son despite the slave's death. God exalted him through it.

Chapter 7

The Visitation Room

The garden.

The Room without Glass

The last hours are spent in a room the public never sees, near the holding cell, where the family and the advisor are allowed in. In some states it is the ordinary visitation room, with vending machines, a microwave, the plastic furniture of death row normalcy. In some states it is the holding area itself, and you sit on the bunk. For once, there is no glass. The state, which has kept a man behind plexiglass for decades, takes it down on the last day, because on the last day it needs him touched. It needs the family to have said goodbye. It needs the paperwork to show that they did.

The first thing that happens without glass is touch. Anthony Wainwright's hands through the bars. Anthony Boyd, after months of phone calls, pulling me aside to talk in a tone I had not heard before, as though he had already crossed halfway into eternity and was visiting from the other side. In Florida, Anthony sat on the floor of his cell, touching the bars. I pulled up a chair and leaned into them to be as close to him as I could. I don't know who said I love you first. I held onto his hands until I was told I had held on too long. Too long was the point.

The visitation room has a table where the chamber has a window, and God sits at tables, where people face each other. The visitation room is the last place in the state's liturgy where the man is upright, facing someone across a flat surface, an equal. In Alabama, Anthony Boyd raised his legs, one, then the other, while we sat across from each other, to show me the sign he would give in the chamber. He said holding them up was the language of resistance, that when they trembled it was the limit of the body, that I must watch his chest, his feet, his legs. He was teaching across a table. In an hour, he would be flat. The table was the last place he was taller than the state.

What They Say

What the men say when nobody official is listening is not what the microphone will hear. Anthony Wainwright asked whether I was going to survive this. I told him I might have a heart attack before we made it to the chamber, and it felt like a real possibility. He told me to make sure the world knew what we talked about, that he did not have one thing to hide. Then Carmen Gayheart came up one more time. I asked whether there was anything he wanted to tell me. He said what he had always said. Then he said he repented of everything. I told him in the name of Jesus Christ he was eternally forgiven. He said let's move on. I was praying he would say that.

Then he asked what forgiveness looked like in heaven. How far grace could take a man. I told him that when he arrived, he would see family, friends. Then in the distance he would see Carmen running toward him. She would wrap her arms around him and tell him she forgave him. He said that sounded like some Jeff Hood bullshit. We both laughed. Then he asked whether I believed it. With all my heart, I said. He said he did too. The heavens seemed to open on that. We were somewhere else for a minute, nothing but us and grace. Then it all came back. He asked what that was. I said I did not know, but we had to keep going.

The morning before Oklahoma killed him, Anthony Sanchez sat across from me in a cold visitation room and wanted me to know he had no regrets. He had fought for his innocence the only ways he knew. When I told him I felt I had failed him, he said I had carried his claim to the whole world. Then the sentence I had heard him say a dozen times, said now with the end in the room:

he would rather die on his feet proclaiming his innocence than beg for clemency on his knees. I did it my way, Jeff. Then his grandson. Florentino, six months old, met for the first time the Friday before. The best moment of his life, he said. Moses on the mountain. A land he would see and not enter.

The Ones Who Do Not Come

Some families do not come. Michael Smith's mother and brothers had said they would not be there. He kept hoping. Some cannot. Some are dead. Some are the family of the victim, sitting in another room. Some are the church, which has not come to the visitation room in any execution I have attended. It sends its opinion to the clemency board instead.

The state records who came. It does not record who did not. But the empty chair in the visitation room is part of the rite, the disciples asleep, the crowd that was at the trial and is nowhere near the garden. The ones who did not come were spared everything, which is its own way of being present at a killing: from a distance, with clean hands, like the governor.

The visitation room is where the parable is enacted or refused. The room exists so that someone can come. The gospel says that whoever sits there is sitting with the King. The family who comes is attending an audience with Christ, who has hidden himself in their son in order to be visited. The guards who eat at the far end while the man prays are in the presence of the one they will strap down in an hour, and the parable says that presence will be the question at their judgment. *Lord, when was it that we saw you in prison, and did not take care of you?* And the answer: *just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me* (Matthew 25:44–45). The room is the one place the state has built where the nations can still meet the King before he is killed. Most do not come. The room was built for them anyway.

The Condemned as Source

The condemned man is the source of the last hours rather than their subject. Across that table, Anthony Boyd was preparing himself for death, and he was preparing me to witness it, to endure it, to carry it. His lungs were a sermon, he said. His chest a scripture. Anthony Wainwright wanted to know if I would survive. David Hosier told me to keep living. Every one of them, in the last

room, turned to the person who had come to comfort them and did the comforting. I was the one being prepared.

I did not bring grace to those tables. I brought a Bible, oil, a stubborn refusal to let a man die alone.

Standing near the cross were his mother, her sister, Mary Magdalene, the disciple he loved. He saw them. He spoke to them from the apparatus. *Woman, here is your son. Here is your mother. And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home* (John 19:26–27). The condemned one, from the state's instrument, arranged for the care of the people he was leaving. He made a family out of the ones who stayed. Dennis Sochor did this, emptying his pockets in the last week, on the phone, until nothing was left in them but love. Emmanuel did it in four words: mom, you ok. The man on the table, in the last hour, looking after the ones who will outlive him, because he can see them from where he is.

The church has painted the third word a thousand times. It has not seen it happen in a room built for killing, because the church is not in the room. The women were. The visitation room is where the condemned Christ makes the church a family and hands it responsibilities. The church has to be there to be handed them. It has not been in the room to receive a single one.

The Garden

Jesus took three friends into a garden on the night the state was coming for him. He told them his soul was crushed to the point of death. He asked them to stay awake. He went a stone's throw away, fell to the ground, sweated blood, asked for the cup to pass. When he came back, they were asleep.

We have made Gethsemane into a prayer meeting when it was a death watch, a man coming apart in the dark because the state had scheduled his death, in the company of friends who could not stay awake. Every visitation room I have sat in was that garden: the man is sweating, the friends are exhausted, the torches are already on the road, the state is on schedule.

I have prayed the first half of that prayer with everything I have, all night, before Dusty, before William. *Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me* (Luke 22:42). I have refused the second half. Not my will but yours be done: I cannot say it in that room, because the cup is not from God. God did

not measure Dusty for the gurney. Florida did. There is no thy-will-be-done owed to an executioner.

But the garden is still the garden. Jesus did not ask his friends to fight. He did not ask them to organize, or preach, or fix it. He asked them to stay awake. That is the work of the visitation room: sit at the table, take the bullshit, the laughter, the question about surviving, and do not sleep. I have slept. I have failed at the one thing the garden asked. The men forgave me across the table, every time, before the torches came through the trees.

Chapter 8

The Meal

The eucharist the state cannot stop serving.

The Tray

The last meal arrives on a tray. It comes in the middle of something else. In Alabama, Casey McWhorter and I were working out what he would say about the warden when the tray came through the door. The words stopped for the food. The state does not schedule around the man's conversation. It schedules the tray.

Every state feeds the man before it kills him. The custom is older than any protocol. Some states have limits now: a dollar amount, a menu from the kitchen. But the tray still comes. The condemned eats, or does not, in a holding cell, with guards watching, hours before the poison.

Meanwhile, the guards eat too. In Alabama, snacks were laid out in every direction in the holding area, and the execution squad sat crunching through them with the television up while Casey tried to pray with me. On the way out, stacked behind the reception desk, were trays of food for the party the prison employees were having afterward. When I asked, a guard told me it was a time for them to celebrate a successful execution.

Two tables. One for the man. One for the men who killed him.

Ask a warden why the condemned gets a last meal and he will say tradition. Ask what the tradition means and he will not know. It serves no security. No court requires it. It is the one part of the protocol with no stated purpose. The state keeps it anyway, because to drop it would feel like something the state cannot name.

The church can. A meal before a death is the oldest thing Christians do. On the night he was betrayed, he took bread. The last supper was a last meal: a man who knew the state was coming, eating with the people who would sleep through his garden, then deny him by morning. Then he said do this. The state has kept the custom because it inherited it, and it inherited it from the one meal the empire could not stop.

The Eucharist Served without Recognition

The state serves a eucharist and does not recognize it. It brings a man bread, it brings him something to drink, it lets him eat with whoever is permitted in the room, then it kills him. The order is exact. It is Thursday night and Friday afternoon, compressed into a shift.

I have served the recognized version on the gurney. In Alabama, before the nitrogen, I placed the wafer on Anthony Boyd's tongue with hands that shook. Each bite was slow. I held up the wine and squirted it into his mouth, watched the light catch the ruby liquid as he received it. A dozen guards stood around the gurney, rigid, secondary witnesses to a sacrament. The gurney became holy ground. I had poured part of that wine into a state evidence container an hour before. The desecration cut deep. The sacrament happened anyway.

The morning before Oklahoma killed Anthony Sanchez, we celebrated the eucharist in a visitation room with the time running out. Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again. The words went around the small room like a bell. God was in the bread. God was in him. When we finished, he asked whether this meant we could meet at the gates of heaven. Absolutely, I said. Love always wins. Then he said the thing I have carried since, the thing no clemency board will ever hear. I bet Juli Busken will be there too.

In Florida, over William Silvia, I spoke the Latin words I have said a thousand times over bread and wine. The words sounded ancient and absurd,

like carrying a chalice into an emergency room. That is why they work. They have survived every gallows, every plague ward, every place where humans convinced themselves that death was the final authority. They survived Florida. What happens when the body in front of you is not on an altar but on a gurney? The words do not change. The body is the body.

Who Eats with Him

Jesus was accused of one thing more than any other: eating with sinners. The charge was that he ate with them before they had done anything to deserve a seat.

Who eats with the condemned? The guards, at a distance, watching a game; the advisor, when permitted; the family, sometimes, across a table in a room with vending machines. Not the church, not the governor, not the prosecutor who told the clemency board that God was present in the process, not the people with the megaphones. The people who most want the man dead are the ones who would never sit at his table, and that is the tell, because you can only want a man executed from a room he is not in. Table fellowship kills the appetite for execution. Jesus knew that, and it is why he kept eating with them.

Dennis Sochor refused the meal. Florida killed him in July of 2026, at seventy-four, for the murder of Patricia Gifford on the first morning of 1982. I was not in the room. He had not understood the rules in time to ask for me. On the phone the morning before, he told me he did not need a last meal or nothing, that he was going on a spiritual journey of prayer and fasting until the end. He had been refusing the vending machine food during his last visits with a woman named Ellie whom he loved. I don't want to waste time eating, he said. I want to look at her all the time.

A man with hours left chose hunger so that not one second of looking at love would be stolen from him. He renamed the table too. It's my journey gurney, he said. The state built a table to end him. He turned it into a launch pad.

The church's refusal is different from the family's. The church claims to be the body of the one who ate with sinners, and in fourteen executions it has

not sent anyone to the table. It sends letters to the board. It does not send itself. The chair at the table stays empty, and the tray comes anyway.

The body of Christ will not eat with the body of Christ.

This Is My Body

Table fellowship with the murderer, before repentance, is the first act of the preference rather than a reward for it, which is the doctrine the church has always found hardest. Jesus did not wait for Zacchaeus to give back the money. He invited himself to dinner, and the money came after. The meal comes first, and sometimes the repentance does not come, but the meal still happened. Judas ate. Peter ate. The one who would betray took the bread from the same hand as the one who would deny, and the hand did not stop.

The state's last meal follows that order: food before verdict, bread before blood. The state has kept the one part of the gospel it cannot explain, and it is the part the church has forgotten.

Take; this is my body (Mark 14:22). The body that was about to be arrested, stripped, nailed, made itself bread and handed itself around a table to men who would fail him by morning. So the eucharist continues the incarnation rather than remembering it. The Word keeps taking flesh, and one of the fleshes it takes is bread, placed on a tongue. When I put the wafer on Anthony Boyd's tongue with the guards around the gurney, two incarnations met. Christ in the bread. Christ in the man. The body of Christ received the body of Christ, in a room built to deny that either was present.

The murderer at the table is the flesh Christ is wearing, receiving the flesh Christ became, not a sinner permitted to approach the sacrament. The church has not forgotten whose body is on the altar. It has forgotten whose body is on the gurney. They are the same.

At the same table, he took the cup. *This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many* (Mark 14:24). Hours later, in the garden, he asked for the cup to pass. The cup he had just handed his friends was the cup he did not want to drink. The men I have fed on the last day drank both. The bread went on Anthony's tongue and then the mask went on his face. The Latin went over Will and then the blue climbed his lips. The sacrament does not spare the man the cup. It gives him the body of the one who drank it first.

The Table at the End

Scripture's picture of the end is a meal, a wedding feast, a table on the mountain with rich food, where death is swallowed up and every tear wiped away. Neither a courtroom nor a scale. A table.

So, a table with a murderer at it is the first sign of the end: it is what the kingdom looks like from the inside. When I told Anthony Wainwright that Carmen Gayheart would run toward him, I was describing that table, and for a minute we were somewhere else. The meal moves the room. I do not have to defend the picture, since the prophets drew it: Isaiah's feast does not seat the guests by verdict, Revelation's wedding has no penalty phase. Every eucharist is a rehearsal of a table where the murderer sits down with the murdered, because otherwise it is not the end. It is a longer trial.

The tray is a sacrament the state cannot see. So is the wafer on Anthony Boyd's tongue while the guards stood rigid. So was the bread the guards ate, crunching, because the preference covers the crunching too, the party trays, all of it, every mouth in the building. A sacrament is no reward for the worthy. The bread is placed on the tongue of the one who is about to die and the one who is about to kill him. *You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies* (Psalm 23:5). I have read it over gurney after gurney with my hand on a foot. It never says the enemies leave.

Chapter 9

The Walk

The procession.

Two Walks

There are two walks. The first takes the man from the visitation room to the holding cell beside the chamber, and the second takes him the last few steps from the holding cell through the door. The first is measured in hallways, the second is measured in feet, both are measured in years, because a man does not walk to a gurney in an afternoon. He has been walking since the verdict. The hallway is the last few feet of a road the state laid decades ago.

The advisor walks too, on a different route, through a different set of doors. I have never been permitted to walk beside a man on the first walk. I meet him on the far side of it. The state separates the two so that no one from outside sees the man carried, or dragged, or steadied by guards, on his way to the room.

Before Anthony Sanchez, I walked a hundred and twenty miles across Oklahoma, from death row in McAlester to the governor's office, to ask for a stay. It was the longest walk in this book. It ended without one. The state answered a hundred and twenty miles with a few feet of hallway.

In Alabama, the walk goes through Holman, and Holman is half condemned as a structure. A guard sets a fast pace so you will not look around.

The smell keeps up with you. As we approached a dark hallway, I looked up. There were cats everywhere, colors going in every direction. I never imagined that walking through the halls would be like parting a sea of cats. Can you imagine having to dodge cats on the way to seeing someone you love executed? The solemnity of the cats foreshadowed the evil approaching. Doors, identification, nausea: the stations of the advisor.

Who Walks with Him

The state walks with him. Officers on each side, a captain in front, a warden somewhere behind. The state has made sure that no one walks the man to the room but the state. It has made sure the man does not walk alone, because a man who walked alone might be seen as a man.

Then the door opens for one more. A court said the state had to let the spiritual advisor in, and so, at the last few feet, I walk. Not beside him. He is already strapped by the time I arrive. But I walk the last of it, through the last door, to the gurney. In that walk I am the only person in the building who is there for him.

The first time the door to the chamber opened for me, in Oklahoma, it was cold inside and cold outside. I was surrounded by officers from the moment I arrived until the moment I left, because I was the dangerous pastor the state had called a domestic terrorist. When someone asked me later what I thought about an execution at that hour in that remote place, I said only cowards kill in a closet. The walk to that closet was the walk I had sued for.

In Missouri, after David, I was escorted out through door after door, each one slamming behind me. I asked the guard how he was dealing with being this close to an execution. He said it, flat, firm: time's up. It was the only answer the building had taught him. It was also the truest theology I heard in Bonne Terre that night. The state does not ask how anyone is dealing with it. It keeps the clock.

The Mark of Cain

The church is supposed to be the mark of Cain. The walk forces that doctrine, the first ecclesiology in the book.

God marked the murderer so that no one would kill him. The mark was a body between the killer and the vengeance. It said: to reach him you will have to go through this. The church, if it is the body of the one who was executed, is that mark. It is meant to stand between the condemned and the state, not as an argument, as a body. It is meant to walk with him, so that anyone who wants the man has to walk through the church first.

The church does not walk. I have never seen it in a hallway. It has sent letters, it has held vigils at a distance, it has told the clemency board that the man is lost, or, in its kinder moods, that the man has repented and deserves mercy. It has never once put its body in the hall between the holding cell and the gurney. The state has had to be sued to let one preacher through the door, and the church did not file the suit. I did. The mark of Cain was a body, and it cannot be mailed.

So, the mark is thin: one man in a robe, in a hallway full of cats, or on steel steps, or stumbling in Missouri. It is a body, though, and it is there, the only thing in the building that says by its presence that the mark has not been removed.

The Way of the Cross

The church has walked the way of the cross for centuries, in stations, along streets, with the beam. It has made the walk of God to the place of execution into a devotion, and it has forgotten that it is a description of a procedure: a condemned man, sentenced, is walked by soldiers through a city to the place where the state kills, he falls, he is helped, he meets his mother, he is stripped at the end. The stations are the protocol of a Roman execution, kept by people who loved the man being walked.

The walk from the holding cell to the chamber is the via dolorosa. The Word keeps taking flesh, and the flesh keeps being walked to the room. Anthony Boyd, walked past his family so they could see him one last time, was at the fourth station, where he meets his mother. The stations were kept by the church because the church expected to see them again.

Simon was pulled from the crowd to carry the beam. Veronica, in the tradition, wiped the face. The women of Jerusalem wept along the route. Those are the only people on the way of the cross who are not soldiers or the

condemned, and the church has painted them, prayed with them for two thousand years. Then, on the actual walk, in the actual hallway, the church is absent, and one preacher in a robe is Simon, Veronica, the women, alone, dodging cats.

He set his face to go to Jerusalem (Luke 9:51). The steps of the incarnate one toward the place of his death were chosen steps. Then, on the last morning, he was walked out again, by soldiers, under the beam, and he fell. Both walks are Christ's, the chosen one and the compelled one, so that no step taken toward a chamber is a step God has not taken. Steven fought the strap-down and was walked anyway. Dusty walked at seventy-four with a failing liver. The steps and the years are his. He counted them first.

The letter to the Hebrews says the Son suffered outside the gate, in the place of the unclean, the disposed-of, the outside. Then it gives the church its marching orders. *Let us then go to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured* (Hebrews 13:13). Every prison is outside the gate. Holman sits in the pines an hour from anything. McAlester, Bonne Terre, Starke, Livingston: towns whose economy is the outside. The execution chamber is the burning place outside the camp. The letter says the Son is there. It does not tell the church to bring him back inside. It tells the church to go out. The church has read the letter for two thousand years. The hallway is still one man in a robe. The camp is still full.

Simon

There is a warning here for advisors. I am the one who has to give it. The state has a use for the minister. When the Supreme Court held in Ramirez, in 2022, that Texas could not keep a man's own pastor from touching him and praying aloud in the chamber, the states could no longer keep us out. They adapted. A minister at the gurney became evidence that every dignity was afforded. A prayer in the chamber became a line in the press release. The spiritual advisor who blesses the state's process, who thanks the warden for his professionalism, who tells the press the man died peacefully, has changed sides. He has become the chaplain the empire always had: the priest who walks with the condemned so that the crowd can see the execution was blessed.

I have felt the pull. I have been walked through prisons by kind assistant wardens who wished none of it had to happen, I have kept my voice at the volume the warden set, I have stepped back when told. There is a version of me the state would like to keep: the reasonable one, the one who has seen fourteen, who does not make a scene. The men expected something else. Michael Smith expected me to be a prophet. You have got to stand strong for me, Jeff. The walk is where you find out which side you are on, because the walk is where the state is kindest.

Those few feet from the holding cell to the gurney took each man decades: every step the state counts in feet, the man counts in years.

Simon of Cyrene was pulled out of the crowd to carry the cross. He did not volunteer, he walked with the condemned man because the state made him. His sons are named in the gospel, which means the church remembered him, which means he stayed. I am not Simon. I volunteered, I sued, I signed the paper. But Simon is the church's only model for what it is to walk with the state's condemned, and the model is compulsion. The church walks when it is forced, while the rest of the time it stands in the crowd.

Every one of the men I entered beside stayed behind, and I carried their names out. One goes in without coming out. One goes in, then comes out with a name he did not have before.

Part Three

The Chamber

Chapter 10

The Holding Cell

The vigil.

The Last Hour

The holding cell is beside the chamber. In Alabama, the door to the chamber looks like the door to a vault, close enough for the man to watch the guards come through it. In Florida, it is the last stop on Death Watch, the actual term the state uses, which is more right than the state knows. A man waiting to be killed is watched without pause, never accompanied. The distance between those two things is the distance between the state and the church, which the church has not crossed.

In Alabama, I asked the guards again and again to turn the television down. They laughed. When the cell door opened, I sat as close to Casey as I could. The bed was softer than I thought it would be. Casey was on the phone, close to shouting, talking to his mother. Then we were able to pray together. I tried to read scripture. It was of no use. ESPN filibustered the entire visit.

Kenny Smith spent his last hour on the phone. I stood in the hall outside his cell watching a newly installed oxygen monitor, put there to catch nitrogen leaks, because the state had told me in writing that the gas could kill me. It read 25.4. During my orientation earlier in the week, it had read 22. My head began to ache. I tried to ignore it. Kenny was the only thing I was allowed to be there for. After he hung up, I gave him to God, and the guards sent me out so they

could fit the mask. I looked back into his cell at the rustled sheets, at the shower where traces of water remained. I tried to think of presence rather than absence.

Anthony Wainwright spent his last minutes repeating a psalm with me through the bars, the valley of the shadow of death, over and over, until the guard called time. I reached through the bars, touched his head, made the cross. Then something in my palm. The rosary I had given him. Hold on to this for me, he said. I don't think I'm going to need it where I'm going.

Emmanuel Littlejohn spent his last hour waiting for a stay. When the door opened on him, strapped, he blurted out that he had thought we were going to stop this thing. I said I had too. I said I was sorry. Then he motioned me closer, and I took his hand.

In Huntsville, in the cell beside the chamber, I began Jamaal's last hour with the valley. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I did not explain the valley to him. He had been walking it since a bullet entered his skull at seventeen, through the Chevron in Silsbee, through twenty-five years of Haldol, and he could not have held an explanation anyway. Words went into him and did not come back whole. So I held them. I said them to him, and when he could not say them back, I said them for him. I told him God was with him. I told him I was. The second promise was the smaller one. The valley in Huntsville is short. It ends at a table.

While We Were Yet Sinners

The holding cell forces the doctrine the church claims to believe and cannot stand to see. *While we still were sinners Christ died for us* (Romans 5:8). While, not after.

Taken at its word in a holding cell, it means grace arrives before repentance. It arrives whether or not the man has said he is sorry, whether or not he has said anything. Kenny did not have to earn the oil on his shins. Emmanuel was not repenting when the door opened. He was cursing the failure of a stay. The preference was on him anyway. It was on him before I walked in. It was on him before the stay failed.

The church has written whole systems to make the while into an after: it has said grace is offered while, but received only after, so that the turning is still

the key that opens the door. The holding cell has no key. The door opens from the outside, on the state's schedule, and the man inside is not in charge of what he has become by then. Some have turned, some have not, but the preference does not check.

The Church's Two Mercies

The church allows itself two mercies for the condemned. It will grieve the innocent sufferer: the man who did not do it, whose execution is a scandal. It will celebrate the transformed killer: the man who found God on the row, who leads Bible study, who deserves clemency because he has learned the right tricks. Both are real. I have fought for both.

Neither mercy is the preference. Both require the man to be something other than a murderer in order to be held. The innocent sufferer is held because he is not guilty. The transformed killer is held because he is no longer the man who killed. The church has never found a way to hold the third man, the one who did it and has not been transformed, the one who can say only that he has done a tremendous amount of things he is not proud of. That man is in the holding cell too. Scott was that man for much of his life. Michael was that man for part of his. The church has never known what to do with him, so it has done nothing.

Arthur saw through this before I did. They should not kill him because they should not kill him, he had said, not because he was a dog that had learned tricks. He refused the second mercy because he understood that it was still a verdict, softened. The preference lands whether or not repentance comes, which separates it from every mercy the church has learned to offer, because each of those has a condition and this has none.

I have to write about the unrepentant, because the book is a fraud if it stops at the men who made me look good. Scott Eizember showed, to the end, something close to indifference about the couple he killed. I stood with him anyway. I have written that I felt like an accessory. I have also written that the very body of Scott Eizember calls out for repentance: ours, not his.

The unrepentant man forces a reversal: he is not the one the holding cell is asking to turn. We are. The state built the cell so that the last hour would be the man's, so that he would use it to repent, so that we could kill a penitent and call

it clean. God built the hour the other direction. It is the church's hour to turn. The man on the bunk is already held.

The Night in Custody

Between the garden and the trial, the gospel records a night in custody. He was bound. He was taken to the high priest's house. He was questioned, struck, spat on, blindfolded, mocked: prophesy, who hit you. Peter denied him in the courtyard while it happened. The incarnate God spent his last night in a holding cell, guarded, waiting for a schedule other men controlled.

God spent that night the way the men spend theirs: waiting, watched rather than accompanied, with the state holding the body and the hour. The Son sat in the custody of men who ate, joked, hit him, until it was time. Everything I have seen in a holding cell, the television, the snacks, the guard's laughter at a request to turn it down, was in that courtyard first.

He had no advisor. There was no one permitted in with him. The only people who came through the door that night were the ones who struck him. When a court forced the states to let a spiritual advisor into the holding cell, it corrected, two thousand years late, the abandonment of the Son in Caiaphas's house.

The tradition has said that God cannot suffer. It was protecting the idea that God is not at the mercy of the world. The holding cell breaks that idea. The one in the holding cell was God, suffering, in no costume. A God who cannot suffer has never spent an hour in one.

Condemned theology holds that God suffers in the murderer, which is more than observing the murderer's suffering with compassion. The suffering of the man on the bunk with the television blasting, of the man vomiting for weeks before a mask, of the man texting at 2:48 in the morning about an appeal his lawyers may not have filed, is suffering God is undergoing, in that flesh. This is the point at which the preference stops being a doctrine about God's attitude and becomes a doctrine about God's location. A God who prefers the murderer from a throne is a merciful judge. A God who suffers in the murderer is the incarnation, still going, in the one place the state has certified it cannot go.

Luke alone records it. *In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground. When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief* (Luke 22:44–45). The agony has three parts the church skips. First, the body, the fear pressed so hard on the incarnate flesh that sorrow came out through the skin. I did not understand that line until I had sweated a man's sweat in the dark before Dusty. Second, the angel, since strength was sent, not rescue: the cup did not pass, but something came into the garden that made it possible to drink. Third, the sleeping friends, because the agony was undergone in the presence of people who loved him and could not stay awake.

The Hour Itself

I have used the hour badly. I dozed in a corner in Alabama and dreamed I was the one on the gurney. I slept through Michael's text. I could not hear Casey over the television. I stood in a hallway with a headache, watching an oxygen number, while Kenny made his last call without me in the room. The hour belongs to the man, and it does not belong to the advisor's success story. It is the hour in which the man does what he can, in a cell with a fused toilet, with a phone, with a breathing exercise, with a map for the ones who come after, and it is the hour in which grace was already present before anyone with a Bible arrived. Then the guard knocks on the vault door, four quick taps, two slow.

Chapter 11

The Door

The threshold.

The Threshold

In every state there is a door between the holding cell and the chamber. In Alabama, it looks like the door to a vault. The guard knocks in a code, four quick, two slow, hollow knocks from hollow hands, and the door swings open. In Oklahoma, a hooded man stands beside it. In Missouri there are so many doors that you lose count, then one slides open and you are at the epicenter. In Texas the door is huge, and when I went back out through it after Steven Nelson, the night swallowed me whole.

The door is the last threshold the man crosses on his own feet, and the one station with no words. Nobody reads anything at the door. Nobody prays. The door is crossed, and everything after it is different from everything before.

The big steel door at Holman is cold, unyielding. Walking toward it before Anthony, I asked the guard to pray for us. He nodded. The door did not. After, it opened with a thud, and three medical professionals walked past me with their faces hidden, on their way to find a time of death for the world. The same door that takes the man in lets the ones who certify him through. It has one sound for both.

Anthony Boyd said it best. Every time I do this, there is a point where I realize there is no going back. Walking toward that big steel door in Alabama, I could not breathe. Each breath felt filtered through iron and concrete. My knees wavered. The pit of my stomach clenched so hard I could feel it in my throat. I walked forward, inch by inch, negotiating my own existence.

Every door in the building locks. This one is the only one that closes.

The Abyss

The tradition has a word for what is on the other side: the abyss, the deep, the place Jonah went for three days, the place the psalmist cries from, the place the creed says Christ descended to. He descended into hell. The church has never been comfortable with that line: it has explained it, softened it. The chamber gave it back to me at full strength.

The far side of the door is the abyss, the place the state has built to be outside God's reach, and the state means it. The protocol has no line for God. The room is designed so that what happens in it is the state's alone, sealed, behind a vault door, at an hour when the rest of the country is eating dinner. The abyss is a place people have built on the premise that God will not.

I have gone into it. Before Michael Smith, in Oklahoma, I stood at the door with the hooded man and asked myself the only question that mattered on that side of it. What are you going to do to resist the evil behind that door. I had no answer. I had oil, a Bible, my body. The knocks came. The door opened. Before David, in Missouri, a door failed to open at all. Someone had forgotten we were coming. The assistant warden radioed ahead, frustrated. I stepped on my robe. Then the last door slid open, and there was David in the middle of a room made of mirrors.

Going into the abyss takes no bravery. It is a walk through a door. Christ's descent was the same, whatever the church likes to say about courage. He went where the state had put the dead. The doctrine is only that he went, that the door did not hold him out, that there is no place built for the abandoned that the one who was abandoned has not entered.

Scripture's gates are always being opened from a direction they were not built for. *The gates of Hades will not prevail against it* (Matthew 16:18). The gates of hell were built to keep the dead in. Christ's descent opened them from

inside. The chamber door is a gate. It was built to keep everything out but the state. A court had to force it open for me, and the state resented every inch. It opened anyway, because the man inside asked for me, because a court said the man's asking had weight. The gate opened from the side it was not built for.

He Descended

The creed says it in three words, and the church has been embarrassed by them ever since. He descended into hell, into the place itself, and not only into the grave. The tradition pictured it: the Son, dead, going down into the region of the dead, breaking the gates, taking Adam by the hand, emptying the prison. The icons show him standing on the broken doors.

The door to the chamber is that door. A room built to be the one place outside God's reach, sealed, coded, entered on the state's schedule, is a definition of hell. The creed says God went into that place, dead, by way of an execution, and did not come out alone.

When I walk through the vault door in Alabama behind a man walking through it for the last time, I am walking behind Christ into the place the creed says he entered. The Word has taken that flesh, and that flesh is going through the door. The gates of that room are the gates of hell. They did not prevail on Saturday. The state posted a guard on the tomb. The guard was on the wrong side of the door.

The creed says he died. The tradition has been careful to say that the Son died in his human nature, so that it need not say God died. The room makes the care impossible to sustain. If the Word took flesh, and the flesh died, then the Word went through death rather than around it. The gospel does not describe a God who watched a man die on the cross. It describes God dying, which is the abyss on the far side of the door, and the reason the door can be crossed.

The point of no return was crossed by God, so every man I have walked through the door with went through it into the death of God, the only place from which anyone has ever come back.

I was dead, and see, I am alive forever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades (Revelation 1:18). The keys. The one who went through the door came back with what opens it. The state's power is, at bottom, the

power to lock a door with a man on the wrong side of it. The gospel's last claim about the executed one is that he took that power. He went through the locked door the state built, died on the far side, came back holding the keys, so that the door the state locks is a door he can open from either side.

The advisor can go through because the door has already been opened from the inside by the one it was built to hold, not because a court ordered the state to let him, though a court did. The court's order was the state being made to admit what the resurrection had already done to its locks.

The Cry

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? (Psalm 22:1). The cry from the far side of the door is the only prayer the abyss permits, and the executed God prayed it.

I have heard it in the chamber. Not in those words. In Kenny's eyes when the mask went on. In Michael's whispering of the psalm while the warrant was read. In my own throat, in Alabama, when nobody anywhere seemed to be listening. The church has spent two thousand years making sure no one hears that cry as forsakenness. It has explained that he was quoting a psalm, that the psalm ends in triumph. He may have known how it came out. The cry still happened. It came out of a throat. On the gurney it happens without the psalm's ending, in a room where the ending is scheduled to be a certificate. Forsaken is what faith sounds like on the far side of a vault door.

Through

I stand at the door with something in my hands, and it is never enough. Oil that spilled down my pants in Oklahoma so it looked like I had wet myself. A Bible with its cover torn off. Wine partly poured into an evidence container. Once, nothing, because the guards took everything, so I went in with my body. I have thought a hundred times about what to bring, as if the right object could carry what my mouth cannot. There is nothing to bring. You do not get to bring things to the foot of a cross. You bring yourself. You bring eyes that will not turn away. You bring a body willing to stand in the room the whole world refuses to enter.

I am afraid at the door, every time, afraid I will not be enough. A man is drowning on the other side, and they are sending him a priest already broken by every chamber before this one. I have no pardon in my pocket, I have no key, I have a collar, a Bible, a stubborn refusal to let him die alone. At the door, that is all of it. Let it be enough.

Then through. The room. The gurney in the middle. The man already strapped. The first thing said is always love. Hey brother, I'm here, I love you very much. I love you, Jeff. I love you too, brother. Good evening, Jeff. Aw shit, I thought we was going to stop this thing.

The door closes behind me. I have never heard it close. By then, I am at the gurney. The threshold is behind us both. What is on this side is the chamber, the room the state built to prove that God does not come through doors like that one. God came through it every time, in the only way the state permitted, which was in the body of a frightened man in a robe, one step behind the murderer, who had gone through first.

Chapter 12

The Chamber

The sanctuary.

The Room Apart

Consider the room itself. It is a space the state has consecrated, though the state would never use the word. No other activity happens there, no one eats lunch in it, and it sits empty for months, cleaned, rehearsed in with a dummy, then used for a single hour, then mopped by prisoners, then closed. It is the one room in the prison that exists for one purpose, and the purpose is death.

In Missouri, the walls are mirrors. In Oklahoma, the fluorescent light floods everything, and tubes, monitors, white sheets litter the place to make it look medical. The state has decorated its sanctuary as a clinic. The decoration does not change what the room is for.

The chamber at Holman was bone-chilling cold, a cold that seeped into the marrow. An executioner coughed, and the sound bounced off the walls. Anthony smiled faintly. I looked at the oxygen monitor. It read low. I thought: if I must die, there is no better place to give my life in love. The state had told me in writing the room might kill me. The room was cold enough to make it believable. The only warm thing in it was the man on the table.

Here is who is in the room. The man, on the gurney, in white. The advisor, at the foot or the side, where the warden said. The executioners,

behind the wall, unseen. The witnesses, behind the curtain, in rows. The guards along the walls. A captain. A warden. A hooded man whose job is to drag me out. Somewhere, a doctor, hiding his face. And the dead. The victims are in the room. Their names are in the warrant. Their families are behind the glass. Their blood is the reason the room exists.

God is not on the roster, which is the state's admission, made in the protocol's list of assigned roles. Every other presence in the room has a station and a script, while the advisor's prayers are permitted as the man's right rather than as the state's act. The protocol seats everyone. God stands.

Golgotha

This is why God is most present there, and I say it as a report from every room I have stood in rather than as consolation.

The gospel is that God went where God was not permitted. Into a stable, into a leper's skin, into the dirt with a woman about to be stoned, onto a cross outside the city on the empire's timetable. The pattern of the incarnation is that the excluded place is the chosen one. A room designed to be the one place in the world where God's preference does not apply is not a room God avoids. It is a room God prefers, in the strict sense of this book: the place the eye goes first.

Anthony Boyd said it in his own way. The nitrogen chamber at Holman was Golgotha. The hill where Alabama drags men to die. The state called it justice. He called it crucifixion.

The place of the skull. Outside the city wall, along a road, on a rise so the crowd could see. The empire's chamber. It had its protocol: the scourging, the beam, the titulus, the nails, the guard, the timekeeping, the spear to confirm death. It had its witnesses, its curtain, which was the darkness at noon, its pronouncement, which was the centurion's, its certificate, which was Pilate's surprise that he was dead so soon.

Every chamber I have stood in is Golgotha. McAlester sits on land taken from the Choctaw. Anthony Sanchez was Choctaw. The state carried him home to kill him. The room is the place of the skull because the incarnation has made it so: God went to the empire's chamber, was killed there, so that every

chamber since has been that one, with a microphone where the titulus was and a hooded man where the soldiers stood. It is the same hill.

If the chamber is Golgotha, then the one being killed in it is the crucified, and standing beside him is standing at the foot of the cross. In the flesh, with a hand on a shin. The women who stood there had no theology of it. They stood. That is all the chamber allows. It is enough, because the one on the cross was God. The ones who stood were the only church he had.

Fear in Every Direction

The room is full of fear, and the fear does not run in one direction. It runs from the man to the advisor, from the advisor to the guards, from the guards back to the man, out to the witnesses behind the glass. Fear is the only thing in the chamber that is not strapped down.

The guards are afraid. In Alabama, over a dozen of them stood around Anthony Boyd's gurney rigid, shifting, taut, poised as though the strapped man might rise. When the nitrogen started on Kenny, the terror was thick in the room, the way even the guards trembled, the way the witnesses went pale. The executioners are afraid, or they work hard not to be. The warden at Holman, Terry Raybon, shuffled to the microphone so slowly that I could see, in my mind, a trail of sulfur on the floor behind him. He looked weak. Evil has a strange look. It is mostly fear.

The man is afraid too, until, in most cases, he is not. Most of the men went calm. Not all, and not always for long, but often enough to be a pattern rather than a mercy. Casey McWhorter lay on the gurney with his eyes closed for forty-five minutes while the state fumbled with its witnesses, and I asked myself whether I had ever seen a soul float. Nobody in the room gave a damn about him. He lay there fighting for his peace. He found it.

Emmanuel, when the oil went on his forehead, closed his eyes and said he could feel it. When I read that death would be no more, every muscle in his face let go. Kenny smiled while they strapped him down. Anthony Boyd, cruciform under the sheet, turned his head as far as the straps allowed when the warden approached with the warrant, and said, with a rasp that almost passed for a laugh, go ahead, pumpkin head. Just saying what I see. Then he went still.

The calm is no achievement of the state's. It is the mark, felt from the inside, whatever sedation the state adds, a man discovering on the table that the thing the state has scraped at for thirty years is still on him, and that it is enough.

On the last afternoon, Jamaal looked at the people around him and asked me why everyone was crying. He could not grasp that we were grieving him. In the chamber, I prayed the beatitude over him: blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Texas had spent a quarter century measuring his mind, and no instrument it owned could find his heart. Jesus did not say blessed are the competent. He did not say blessed are those who know what day it is. I told Jamaal that seeing God was next. Whether he understood me is the one question the state shares with me, and neither of us gets to answer it.

I have no calm to report on my own account. In Alabama, when the nitrogen came for Kenny, I took off my glasses and sobbed. I was doing the best I could. What the terror teaches is that the advisor is not the strong one. He is a body in a robe, at the foot of a gurney, coming apart, with a Bible open to the same three passages, held up by a wall.

The Exchange

Then the exchange happens, the most consistent thing I have witnessed in any chamber: the man steadies the one who came to steady him.

Kenny: we got this. Anthony Boyd, in the mask, whispering that he loved me, that he had this, over and over, so that I said it back, we've got this, we've got this. Steven Nelson, with bandages on his arms, reading my face: you didn't fail, Jeff. You did more for me than I ever could have imagined possible. Arthur, shaking his foot under the sheet to tell me to stay strong, because I was the one trying to. Emmanuel, after I apologized for failing to stop it: Jeff, if it hadn't been for you we would have never made it this far. David, the day before: you will be there too, but I need you to keep on living. Anthony Wainwright, before I had said a word at the gurney: I love you, Jeff.

The exchange has no line in the protocol. There is no station at which the condemned comforts the spiritual advisor. It happens anyway, without words half the time, in a look or a foot or a whisper through plastic, and it happens in

the same direction every time. From the gurney outward. From the murderer toward the frightened man in the robe.

Grace flows from the murderer. I did not deduce that, I received it, in a room where the state had certified that the man had nothing left to give, and everything in this book rests on it.

Do not let your hearts be troubled (John 14:1). I read it in every chamber, as consolation to the man. The gospel records it as consolation from the condemned one to his friends, hours before his own death. He was the one dying, and he was the one saying it. When Kenny said we got this, when Steven said you did not fail, the direction was the direction of John fourteen. From the one about to die, toward the ones who would live with it. That is the incarnate Word doing what he did the last time, in the flesh he is wearing this time.

Real Presence

The church has fought for centuries over how Christ is present in the bread. The best of the tradition settled on a phrase: real presence. He is there, in a way that does not depend on the faith of the one receiving, in the thing itself.

The chamber forces the same doctrine about the man: real presence. Christ is present in the flesh on the gurney, in a way that does not depend on the faith of the warden, the witnesses, the advisor, or the man himself. Michael was not sure of the road, Anthony Sanchez refused clemency rather than perform faith, Scott could barely reach remorse, and the presence did not vary. It was there the way the tradition says it is there in the bread: in the thing, not in the believing.

Presence is the only theology the room allows, which does not mean that I brought it. The presence was real, in the body, before I arrived, and I was permitted to stand in front of it the way a priest stands in front of the sacrament, with terror, with a hand out, with nothing to add. Everything else is stripped at the door, argument, hope of a stay, competence, composure, until what remains is a body next to a body. Anthony Boyd said do not look away, see it, remember it, my body will speak. So I watched his legs and counted his breaths, because presence, in the chamber, is the refusal to leave your eyes anywhere else.

The gurney is an altar. I have said it as a figure of speech for years, and in the room it stops being one. In Missouri, when I turned to leave David, I looked up and saw myself in the mirrored wall. Behind me, in the glass, I saw every man I had accompanied to that point, David was with them, they were all saying the same thing. Give them hell. I offer it as what I saw in a mirror in a killing room, with the altar behind me still warm.

Chapter 13

The Hand

The laying on of hands.

Where the Hand Goes

The state decides where the hand goes. In Alabama, the shin, the only part of Kenny I could reach past the guards and the mask straps. In Oklahoma, the ankle for Michael, the hand for Emmanuel, the foot for Anthony Sanchez, who kept talking to me after the drugs began. In Missouri, David's shoulder. In Texas, Steven's head. In Florida, a leg, warm through thin cotton. The protocol fixes it: one hand, one place, no movement toward the face or the lines or the mask.

I sued for the hand. In Oklahoma, when the Department of Corrections tried to keep me out of Scott Eizember's execution, I filed in federal court, and the state backed down rather than lose. In Alabama, before the first nitrogen execution, I sued the commissioner and the warden so that a hand would still be possible in a room full of gas.

I did that because the hand is the only religious liberty a chamber has room for. The state will take every right not demanded by force. The condemned are the baseline for everyone's rights: what the state can take from the man on the gurney it can take from anyone. So I sued for a hand, and the hand is, in the state's own paperwork, a right the murderer has. The state wrote it down. I

hold the state to the document. One hand, one place, no farther: that is what a court gave me.

The First Touch

The first touch in the chamber is a shock, every time, for both of us. Casey: my hand on his shoulder, sweat pouring from my forehead, his reassuring look. Emmanuel: his tattooed forearm under my fingers. Steven: his head under my palm, the bandages on his arms hidden under the sheet. Will: his leg, warm, and the knowledge that the warmth would soon be gone.

For most of these men, that was the first touch from anyone outside the state in decades. The glass had been between them and every hand that loved them. The state permits the hand only in the room where it will kill the man. The theology of that is ugly and exact: the body may be touched by love only once it has become the state's to destroy.

Though there were only a few steps between where I was standing and the gurney, each movement of flesh felt like agony. The gurney is cruciform. It was as if I was going to the feet of the cross. I stopped next to Kenny's legs. Again and again, I was told that I couldn't go farther. I made the sign of the cross on Kenny's shins. I pressed down as hard as I could. I wanted him to know that the limitless, endless love of God was with him.

When Michael asked how he would know we were resisting together, I told him I would raise my fist. I kept it up while he snored and gargled, while he sounded like he was being pulled underwater by his ankles, until my arm felt like it would fall off. Then the hooded man pulled me back. The state permits the hand one place on the body. It never said anything about the air above it.

What the Hand Means

To the state, the hand is a liability managed. It is measured, positioned, watched. In Alabama, when the nitrogen started on Anthony Boyd, I stepped back an inch, because I was not supposed to be that close, and the guard barked at me: no, come back, come back, come back. The state had decided that where my hand was, that was the safe place for it. Moving it was the violation.

At the end, when the curtain slammed and I raised my hand to bless him one last time, a guard shoved me from behind, hard enough to knock the wind

out of me. Do not push me, I said. He pushed again. The hand that had been permitted for the killing was not permitted after it. The state had used it. It was finished with it.

To the man, the hand is the last proof that he is not the state's. Emmanuel told me I could hold his hand, just not start all that caressing. He was setting the terms. It was still his hand. A body touched with love belongs to someone other than the one killing it, which is why the men reach for the hand, for ownership as much as comfort. The hand says this body is claimed.

I have tried to explain this to people in the church. They hear it as humility. It is a report. If the church cannot accept it from a man with tattoos on his forearm and a needle in his vein, it has never understood who wrote half its scripture.

In Missouri, my elbow rested on the tube that was killing David, and I did not pull it. It is a hand the state permitted, on the terms the state set, at the site of a killing the state carried out. I keep it there anyway, because the alternative is no hand at all.

Over Jamaal, the hand had nothing to hold. I made the sign of the cross over him. My hand went down. It went across. The minutes refused to relent the body. I made it again. The minutes refused. I made it again. It was the only prayer left that did not need words, over a man who had never been able to keep them.

Thomas

Scripture's God has hands, and they go where they are not supposed to: they touch the leper, write in the dirt, wash the feet of the one who will betray, then they are nailed. The hand that touches the untouchable is the whole of the incarnation in one gesture, and God's hands have never stayed where they were told.

So, a hand on a strapped murderer's shin is the gesture God makes, whatever the priest intends. When I anointed Casey's forehead in Alabama, making the cross three times, the television blasting behind me, the captain pulling me back, I was doing the one thing the room was built to make impossible: touching the untouchable with love, in the state's sanctuary, under its lights. God's hand was on Casey before mine was. Mine was the visible one.

Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side (John 20:27). The risen Christ invited touch, and the touch he invited was into the wounds the state had made. The incarnation was confirmed by a hand in a wound. The doctrine that the Word became flesh, that the flesh died, that the flesh was raised, was settled for Thomas by contact with the executed body. No argument settled it.

The hand on the gurney is that hand. It is the church's hand on the body of Christ, at the place the state is wounding it. The state permits the hand at the shin because it thinks the hand is a courtesy. The gospel says the hand is how the church has always known the incarnation was true: by touching the body that was killed. The state is right to fear the hand. Thomas's hand ended the argument about whether the executed one was alive. A hand on a strapped murderer's body ends the argument about whether God is in the room.

The risen body kept the marks. The church calls them the sacred wounds and has built devotions around each one. The men have marks too: Kenny's bunched red skin under the mask's rim, Steven's bandaged arms, Anthony's palms where he pressed the gurney, the needle sites under the sheet. The state makes marks in the process of killing, then covers them, because marks are evidence, while the gospel uncovers them: touch them. Condemned theology says the marks the state makes on these men are the sacred wounds, again, that the risen men will keep them, that the church will one day be told to put its hand there and stop doubting.

My hand was on the marks. I have touched, at the moment they were made, the wounds the state makes on Christ's body in this century. The church venerates the wounds of one execution. It has not yet learned to venerate the wounds of the ones happening now, in the same flesh, under the same state, with the marks still warm.

The Hand After

Afterward, the hand is still there. Blood on my fingertip from the grate in Texas. Oil down my pants in Oklahoma. In Alabama, after Anthony Boyd, I picked up the containers I had brought for the eucharist and felt their emptiness as sharply as his body in the chamber. In Texas, I stood over Steven in a small chapel with my hand on his.

The hand goes home, it writes this, and it shakes the night before the next one. It has touched thirteen men at the moment the state finished with them, made the cross over a fourteenth, and it has been blessed by hands it was told were beyond reach. The preference has a hand, and it is not mine. Mine was the one it used.

Chapter 14

The Reading

The proclamation.

The Page

The warrant is read aloud in the chamber, over the restrained body, with the curtain open. It is the one moment in the liturgy at which the state says, out loud, what it believes.

In Alabama, Warden Raybon shuffled out of the control center to read Casey's warrant. Before Kenny, he unhooked the microphone and fumbled it, then did the classic tap on the top to see if it was on. The man with the power to read a death warrant could not be sure his microphone worked, so the most solemn words the state owns began with a sound check. In Missouri, no one reads anything. Nobody tells you it has started. Nobody tells you it has ended. It was David and me, my voice, his strained breathing.

The warrant names the man. Full name. Number. The crime. The victim. The statute. The date. It says the name of the victim into a room that contains her family, over the body of the man who killed her, on purpose, because the reading is meant to bind the two names together one last time: this death is for that one. Then it names the man in the state's voice. Not brother. Not son. Emmanuel signed his letters Manuel. The warrant said Emmanuel Littlejohn. William Silvia was Will to me. The reading strips the name of everything the

row put on it and returns it to the file. The warrant is the one document that spells his name right and gets him wrong.

Over a Restrained Body

The reading happens over a man who cannot move, strapped so that he can turn his head a few inches and no more, while the state reads him its creed as he lies cruciform. That is the posture of the whole ceremony: proclamation over a bound offering.

Michael Smith heard his warrant read. I watched the horrors of his past come back on him at once. He had made clear he had done things he was not proud of. The warrant was written to bring every one of them back into the room. The reading is the state's homily on the man's life, delivered when he can no longer answer except with a few words into a microphone the warden controls.

Some states ask the man whether he understands. Do you understand the warrant. It is a question about competence, asked at the moment competence is least relevant. Benjamin Cole would have said yes, because he believed he was about to rise on the third day. The question does not test understanding. It tests whether the man will say the word the protocol requires so the reader can proceed.

The men understood more than the readers. Casey listened to the warden read him his death and said so into the microphone. Anthony Boyd looked at the warden's head and named it. Emmanuel looked up at his executioners and gave them John 8: let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone. This applies to y'all too. Understanding, in the chamber, ran from the gurney toward the microphone, not the other way.

What Heresy Is

The argument of this chapter needs a definition. Heresy is a false doctrine about God, proclaimed in a liturgy, with the authority of a community behind it. Everyone errs. Heresy is error made into worship.

By that definition the reading of the warrant is a heresy, and the death penalty is the heresy's church. The doctrine proclaimed is that there is a limit to God's love, that this man is on the far side of it, that his life has been weighed by

the people and found forfeit, that his blood will settle another's. It is read aloud, over a bound body, by a vested official, before a congregation seated in rows, in a sanctuary set apart for the purpose. It teaches, with the authority of the state, that God's preference stops at the edge of the gurney.

I am not using the word to insult the state. I am using it because it is the accurate word. The state is wrong about more than policy. It is teaching a doctrine about God in a form designed to be believed. If the state killed men in a basement without ceremony, it would be murder. It kills them in a sanctuary, with a reading, with vestments, with a congregation, with a meal beforehand and a certificate after.

The form is what gives the doctrine away. A doctrine about the limits of God's love can only be sustained by ritual, by repetition, by making the people stand for it. The church should recognize the form. It invented it. The state took the form and put a different god in it: the people, sovereign. Then it put a murderer on the altar.

Two Creeds

The state's creed, written out as it was read over fourteen bodies:

We believe in the people, sovereign, whose verdict is final. We believe that a life may be weighed against a death and found lighter. We believe that blood answers blood. We believe that thirty years of caging a man does not change what he is owed. We believe there is a place beyond the reach of mercy, and that this man is in it. We believe that he was judged at trial, that his appeals were denied, that a governor declined, that the courts have spoken, and that what the courts have spoken is the last word. We believe this death is for the dead. Amen, at six o'clock.

Every article of that creed was proclaimed in a room I stood in. Raybon read it through a microphone he had to tap. In Oklahoma it came down the steel steps with the chief. In Missouri the tube under my elbow did the reading. None of it was said in those words. All of it was said.

Against it, the creed the room forced, as spoken from the gurney rather than written in councils, though it shares the bones of the church's:

I believe in the God who marked the first murderer so no one would kill him. I believe in the God who handed the law to a man with a body buried in

the sand, the psalms to a man who arranged a death by letter, the church to a man who held the coats. I believe in the God who was executed by the state on a warrant, between two murderers, one of whom was promised paradise that day without a hearing. I believe that grace comes before repentance, that the preference lands whether or not the man has turned, that the gurney is an altar, that the murderer on it is preferred, that the executioners behind the wall are held inside the same preference, that no room can be built where this does not apply. I believe in the resurrection of Emmanuel Littlejohn. This is your release date.

I said that last line to Emmanuel in the chamber, after I read the crucifixion and the resurrection. He grinned and asked what if he told me he liked it here. Then he told me to keep reading the damn passages.

Side by side, the two creeds contradict at every line. The people are sovereign, God is. A life may be weighed, it may not. Blood answers blood, blood cries to God, who answers it with a mark. There is a place beyond mercy, there is not. The courts have spoken the last word, the last word is a resurrection. One creed was read off a clipboard by a man in a uniform. The other was said with a hand on a shin, by a man in a robe, to a man who could turn his head a few inches.

In Florida, in the cell, I put the creed to Anthony Wainwright as questions. Do you believe in the love of God? I do. That such love was incarnate in Jesus? I do. That love led him to the cross? I do. That love resurrected? I do. That love will never die? I do. On that profession, I told him he would rest in the arms of love forever. He asked whether love was going to make all of this right. I told him I had no doubt that God was drawing all things to love. So I have nothing to worry about, he said. Nothing. The state had a warrant. He had a creed.

Who reads? A warden, a chief of operations, in Missouri no one. The reader did not write the warrant, did not try the case, did not sign it. He is the voice of a decision made elsewhere, by a governor who is somewhere clean, the priest of a religion whose god does not attend. I have watched the reader's hands. Before Kenny, they could not find the switch on a microphone. He is inside the preference, since the one who reads the heresy is held by the God the heresy denies, and that is no reason to let him keep reading.

The Charge Posted

Pilate wrote a title and put it on the cross. *Jesus of Nazareth, the King of the Jews* (John 19:19). In three languages, so that everyone passing could read it. The priests objected to the wording. Pilate answered: *What I have written I have written* (John 19:22). The warrant was posted over the body, in the state's hand, with the charge, and the state refused to amend it.

That was the first reading of a warrant: the state wrote the charge over the condemned God and left it there while he died. The charge was true, he was the king, and the state proclaimed the truth about the incarnation in its own death warrant, without meaning to, in three languages. It would not take it back. Every warrant since has done the same thing. It names the man, it says, in the state's voice, that this life is heavy enough to require the state's whole liturgy to end. It is a confession of the incarnation, read aloud by the warden.

The law said it. *Anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse* (Deuteronomy 21:23). The apostle took the sentence and did the most reckless thing in his letters with it: *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us* (Galatians 3:13). Became a curse, rather than bore one. The warrant is a curse. It is the state saying, with the authority of law, that this man is accursed, that God is on the side of the rope. The apostle says God went under that curse, in the flesh, on the tree, and that the going-under is what redeemed. He became it, so that the accursed thing on the tree was God, and the curse had nowhere to fall that God was not.

Every warrant read over a strapped body reads the curse of the law. The state thinks it is cursing a murderer. It is reading the sentence that fell on God, over flesh God is wearing, and the curse has already been spent. That is why the reading is heresy rather than only cruelty: it proclaims a curse that was exhausted on Friday, as though it were still live.

Every creed ends with a curse on those who deny it. The state's creed has one too. It falls on the man, on the advisor who stands with him, on the abolitionist who calls the reading what it is. I have been called a domestic terrorist by a state for wanting to be in the room. That is the anathema, and I have accepted it, because the anathema of a heresy is the blessing of the truth it denies. The church's creed has an anathema too, and it falls on no one. The man who spoke it, on his last night, used his last breath to promise paradise to a

criminal. If there is a curse, it is the one Emmanuel put on the room, which was the gospel: this applies to y'all too.

Chapter 15

The Curtain

The veil.

The Veil

There is a curtain, or a blind, or a wall of one-way glass. Behind it, the witnesses wait in rows. At a moment in the protocol it opens, and the man on the gurney is revealed to the people who came to see him die. In Alabama, when Kenny had been suffocating for twenty-three minutes, the guards sprinted to close it, as if to hide what they had done.

The curtain is the veil. The state has hung one in front of its altar, opens it for the sacrifice, closes it when the body is still. The temple had one. It hung between the people and the holy of holies. Once a year a priest went behind it with blood.

Curtains are a means of passage: when the curtains move, you move or you are moved to leave. The curtains controlled my reality. In Oklahoma, one of the executioners pulled back the curtain at the top of the stairs, and I knew what it meant, that the governor had failed Emmanuel. The curtain is the state's favorite object, because it opens when the decision has already been made somewhere else. It never opens before.

The glass is one-way, or dark. The witnesses see the man. The man sees, mostly, himself. He can turn his head. He can find, sometimes, his mother.

Emmanuel turned his head when the curtain opened and found his mother with his daughter, holding each other. Scott turned and mouthed I love you to the daughter he had not spoken to in decades. Will, in Florida, had a mirror above him instead of a curtain, so that he saw the witnesses, the officials, the family, the media, everyone reflected together in one small space, and no one could say afterward they had not seen. The sacrifice cannot look back at the congregation. He can find his mother.

Two Rooms

The victim's family sits in a room the state built for them. They have waited decades. They have been promised that what they are about to see will close what was done to their child, their mother, their brother. Some sit with shirts printed with the victim's face. They were told this window would bring peace. Peace was not the state's to sell. It sold it anyway.

The man's family sits in another room, or in the same room with a partition, while their son is on the table. They have had thirty years of glass too. In Oklahoma, Emmanuel's mother answered him from the witness room when he asked if she was okay. I'm okay. Everything is going to be okay, he said. I love you.

Michael Smith's family did not come. He made me promise to tell them he loved them anyway. Some men have no one behind the glass but the advisor, and the advisor is in front of it. No one from Juli Busken's family came to watch Anthony Sanchez die. His aunt sat in the witness room and waved to him after his last words. His mother stood outside the walls with the protesters. When it was over, I walked out to her and gave her what I had: his last minutes, one at a time. The morning before, he had told me he was more than happy to give his life if it would grant the Buskens peace. The room he said it for was empty.

Who Looks at Whom

When the curtain opens, everyone looks at the man. The man looks for his mother. The advisor looks at the man. Then, if he turns, the advisor looks at the rows.

I have looked. I turned around after Emmanuel's curtain opened and found Attorney General Gentner Drummond in his seat. I squinted at him, asking with my eyes how he could live with himself. The discomfort in his face made it clear he understood the question. He was the one who had signed the motion to slow executions after Scott. He had come anyway. In the room, I could not say it. My eyes could.

The dead are looked at by no one, because they are not there, except in the warrant, on the shirts. The state has arranged the room so that every eye lands on the murderer. It calls that justice for the victim. It is the theater of the second corpse, and the first corpse is nowhere in the sight lines.

Here is what the family sees when the curtain opens: a man in white, strapped, alive, then the drugs, or the gas, then color leaving a face, or a face bulging against plastic, then stillness, then a curtain, then a corpse where a man was. The state promised them a corpse for a corpse, and it delivers. It has made the family witnesses to a killing done in their name, then sent them home. What was owed them was the blood heard, the rage kept by God, the dead honored, while what they got was a second body, then a drive home in the dark.

Ecce Homo

God is with the dead completely, and God is with the killer completely: in the witness room, on the gurney, there is no division in that presence. The blood of Elizabeth Sennett cried from the ground while Kenny fought the mask, and God heard it. God was in the mask. The state's whole architecture is built to make that impossible: it has put the victim's people on one side of the glass and the murderer on the other so that God must choose a side. The curtain is a wall between two preferences, and when it opens, the state expects the room to see justice. What is on display is God on both sides of the glass at once, undivided, in a room designed to divide.

Pilate brought him out, scourged, crowned with thorns, in a purple robe, and said to the crowd: *Here is the man!* (John 19:5). The governor's attempt to satisfy them with a spectacle short of death became the church's icon. Ecce homo. The condemned God, displayed, for the crowd to look at.

The curtain is the ecce homo. It opens, and the man is displayed, in white, strapped, sometimes masked, for the rows. The state means it as justice made visible, while the gospel names what is visible: the man. Behold him, not the file, not the case number, the man. The crowd saw a criminal and shouted for the cross, as some of the witnesses I have watched saw the same. But the gospel records who else was in the crowd that day: his mother, the women, the disciple he loved. They beheld the man too, and saw God. The curtain opens on both congregations at once. It cannot control what they see.

When it was noon, darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon (Mark 15:33). The gospel's curtain was darkness. The sun failed at the moment the Son was dying. The state's spectacle, arranged on a hill for visibility, was hidden by the sky. The state opens its curtain to show. God drew one to hide. The state wants the death seen, by the family, by the press, because the seeing is the point of the second corpse. God darkened the hill, so that the death of the Son was not a show.

Alabama sprinted to close the curtain on Kenny, because it was hiding what it had done. The darkness at noon was God hiding what the state was doing, for a different reason: the refusal to let the death of God be a spectacle for the crowd that had asked for it. Both curtains close on a body, one closes to protect the state, one closed to protect the dying, and the church has to know which curtain it is standing behind.

The Veil Torn

When he died, *the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom* (Mark 15:38). The gospel does not explain. It reports. The wall between the people and the holy place came down at the moment the state finished with a man on a cross.

After Steven, they let me into the small chapel where his body was taken. I stood over him. One prayer came, and it kept coming. God, thank you for Steven. That is what is said over a body by the ones who loved it. Not thank you for justice. Thank you for the man. Someone who knew Scott as a child sent me a picture of him not long after he died. I looked at the boy in it and saw the same hope I had seen on the gurney. The curtain closes on a corpse. The

families carry out the name, which the curtain cannot close on, which was never the state's, which God said first.

Chapter 16

The Final Words

The confession.

The Microphone

There is a microphone. It hangs from the ceiling on a cord, or a warden holds it, or it stands on a boom over the man's face. The state turns it on for the last words and turns it off when it decides they are done. In Alabama, when Casey said what he said about the warden, the microphone was silenced fast. The state controls the volume of the only sentence in the whole ceremony that the man writes.

Every state gives him the sentence. It is the oldest part of the custom after the meal, and the gallows had it, the chair had it, the gurney has it, with a limit: two minutes, or a page, or until the warden nods. The state cannot say why it lets him speak any more than it can say why it feeds him: it inherited the moment. It is the confession, or the homily, depending on the man, and the state has never known which.

What They Said

Casey McWhorter: to his mother, to his family, that he loved them. To the victim's family, that he was sorry. Then: it is not lost on me that a habitual

abuser of women is carrying out this execution. The microphone cut. Casey closed his eyes in triumph.

Kenny Smith, in that folksy drawl, loud enough to reach past the room: tonight, Alabama causes humanity to take a step backwards. I'm leaving with love, peace and light. Thank you for supporting me. Love all of you.

Arthur Brown: what is occurring here tonight is not justice, it's murder of an innocent man for a murder that occurred in 1992. Then, later, before the poison took him: I'm not going to rest in peace, I'm going to rest in power.

Anthony Sanchez, strapped to the gurney at ten in the morning: I'm innocent. I didn't kill nobody. Then, from the witness room, his aunt's hand, waving.

Emmanuel Littlejohn, looking to the witness room: Mom, you ok? I'm ok, she said. Everything is going to be ok. I love you.

Steven Nelson: love, love, love, as the colors moved through his face, one word, until it ran out of breath to ride on.

Anthony Wainwright, to his wife: I love you, Sam.

Anthony Boyd, with the warrant in the warden's hand: go ahead, pumpkin head. Just saying what I see. Then still.

Scott Eizember, without words, a head turned and a mouth shaping I love you to a daughter behind the glass.

Michael Smith wavered to the end about whether to say the words he had planned about the lawyers who had failed him. When the chief asked him for a statement, he said: nah, I'm good.

Greg Hunt, in the mask, shook his head no when Alabama asked, then raised two fingers in something like a peace sign. Dennis Sochor, in Florida, apologized to the Gifford family several times, thanked the people who had loved him for forty years, then commended his spirit to Jesus Christ. He had told me on the phone what he wanted his last words to be. He did not want them for himself. He wanted to give them to the family his wrong had wounded past all mending.

The Statement as Sacrament

A sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace, and the final statement is one: the man's body, bound, producing the one thing the state cannot bind, which is speech. The speech is almost always love.

The list reads: love to a mother. Love to a family. Sorry to the victim's family. Peace and light. A boy's message to his mom that everything is going to be ok. A blessing on the room. The state expected confession or defiance, and it got some of both. What it got most was love, spoken from an altar by a man it had certified as beyond it. The sacrament lies in the direction, from the table outward, not in any eloquence, since most of the words have none. The grace is visible for the length of a sentence, and then the microphone is cut.

Jamaal's last statement came out in pieces. Sentences had never worked for him, and they did not start working on the gurney. He reached for words. He asked Vickie Swartout's family, behind the glass, to accept his apology, to forgive him one of these days. Inside the pieces were the words I had prayed over him in the cell and the chamber. I had not asked him to hold anything. He had held them. The one sentence I could not say for him, he said himself, and the state wrote down what it got.

The state cuts the microphone, but it cannot control what was already said. Casey's sentence went out into the press within an hour. Kenny's step backwards became a headline. Emmanuel's this applies to y'all too, said before the curtain, was heard by every officer in the room, and I have reported it since.

The last words are also the one uncensored artifact of the night. The state controls the reading, the walk, the straps, the drugs, the time of death, the certificate. It gave the man two minutes, and he used them to say what the state could not unsay.

Some of the words were blessings. Love all of you, Kenny said, meaning the room. Emmanuel told the officers that the one without sin could throw the first stone. That is a priest blessing the congregation from the altar, and the congregation had come to see him killed. In the temple, the lamb did not speak. On the gurney, it does, and what it says is the benediction the warden was supposed to say but cannot.

Some of the words were apologies. The state hears an apology as a confession that vindicates the verdict. I hear it as the one thing the state's rite has no way to receive, since there is no station at which the warden says your

apology is accepted, no absolution anywhere in the protocol. The man apologizes into a room that has already decided the apology changes nothing, then it kills him. I gave the absolution myself, in the cell, to Anthony Wainwright, in the name of Jesus Christ, you are eternally forgiven, and on the gurney, to Anthony Boyd, with my hands on his shoulders. The state's liturgy has a confession and no absolution, while the church's has both. The advisor carries the missing half in through the door.

The Seven Words

The church has meditated for centuries on seven sentences said from an execution. *Father, forgive them. Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise. Woman, here is your son. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? I am thirsty. It is finished. Father, into your hands I commend my spirit* (Luke 23:34, 43, 46; John 19:26, 28, 30; Matthew 27:46).

Beside the gurney, they read this way. Forgive them: Emmanuel to his executioners. Paradise today: the promise I made to Emmanuel, this is your release date. Here is your son: Dennis, on the phone, giving away everything he had to the ones who needed it. Forsaken: the cry in every room, in my throat more than theirs. I am thirsty: Will's face going blue. It is finished: the curtain. Into your hands: what I say when I make the last cross.

The seven words were a condemned man's last statement, recorded by the county, and they became the church's liturgy. The state gave him the microphone. It could not control what the church would do with the transcript.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God (John 1:1). On the last afternoon the Word had seven sentences left, in a dying voice, to a small crowd, most of whom had come to watch. The Logos, through whom all things were made, was reduced by the state to a microphone's worth of speech, and the church built its whole devotion to the passion on those seven sentences, because the Word, even reduced to that, was still the Word. Everything the church knows about how to die it learned from a last statement.

So, the last statements of the condemned are the place where the Word, in the flesh it is now wearing, speaks: love all of you, mom you ok, deeply sorry,

rest in power. The Word made flesh in Emmanuel said what the Word made flesh in Jesus said, in a different accent, to a different Pilate: forgive them, this applies to you. The state cut the microphone. It cut the microphone on Friday too, with a spear, and the Word had already been said.

The cry is the incarnation's last word about suffering, and it is a question, not a doctrine. The Son of God, in the flesh, at the end, asked the Father where he was, and condemned theology keeps it. If the Word can ask why, then the man on the gurney can, the priest at the foot of it can. The question is not unbelief. It is the sound the incarnation makes at the bottom.

Some say nothing. I have no further words, Arthur said, then had more. Nah, I'm good, Michael said. Greg shook his head inside the mask. Silence is a statement too. It refuses the state its confession. It is the silence of the one who, before Pilate, gave no answer, so that the governor marveled. The last word is not always a word.

Into Your Hands

What I say, at the end, when the words are over and the warden has motioned me to the wall, is the last of the seven. Father, into your hands I commend his spirit. Then the sign of the cross, in every direction, so that love is the last thing anyone in the chamber remembers. Over Emmanuel, I said that of faith, hope, love, the greatest is love, dozens of times, hundreds, until everyone in the room was tired of it, because if they were participating in an execution they needed to hear it as much as anyone.

The last words are the man's, but the last word is God's, and the advisor gets to say it out loud because a court made the state let him in. It is the word the state has no line for: Father, into your hands I commend my spirit. Not the state's hands, not the ones behind the wall with the plungers, but the hands that marked Cain, that wrote in the dirt, that were nailed. The microphone was cut. The word was said anyway.

Part Four

The Killing

Chapter 17

The Poison

The cup.

The Look of Medicine

Lethal injection is the method built to look like medicine: the gurney is a hospital bed with straps, the lines are IV lines, the sheet is white. In Missouri, the room is a hospital room with mirrors for walls, and everything looks so medical that if you were not paying attention you could mistake it for something other than murder. That is the point.

A green plastic chair, the same as the ones in the visitation area, was the only object of color in David Hosier's chamber. Somebody would sit in that chair on a later visit without knowing it had been there for a killing.

Twelve of the fourteen died this way. The method is old enough now that the witnesses know what to expect, which is the second point of the costume: to make the killing familiar.

The drugs claim three things: that the man will lose consciousness, that he will feel nothing after that, that he will die quietly. The claims are printed on the press release before the execution happens.

The claim underneath all three is that death can be administered without violence, the doctrine the whole book has been dismantling: that there is a way to kill a man that does not touch what he is, that ends a life without harming a

person, that lets everyone in the room go home with the sense that nothing violent occurred.

What the Bodies Showed

Arthur Brown struggled to breathe for close to seventeen minutes. I stood there shaking, asking God to forgive us. Scott Eizember's face turned every color of the rainbow in front of me. Steven Nelson's did the same, then went white, while he said love, love, love. David Hosier went from grey to greyer to ash, over minutes, while the second drug went in. Emmanuel Littlejohn's eyes rolled back, and loud snores filled the room. He left in a hurry. I felt the rips as his soul pulled away from the table. Anthony Wainwright shook a few times, then let go. He had already handed me the rosary.

Will shivered. The chamber is cold. Always cold. His body trembled against the leather restraints. I watched the color leave his face. Not gradually. Not politely. It drained. His lips changed first. Then his cheeks. Then his forehead. Blue. The blue of drowning. The blue of a body being emptied while it is still alive.

The press releases describe none of that. It is what I saw from a foot away, with my hand on the man. The witnesses behind the glass, farther back, with the state's advance description in their pocket, often say it was peaceful. The state has trained them to say it. The face changing color, the chest heaving, the snoring that is the sound of an airway failing, the seventeen minutes: none of that is peace. It is a drowning done from the inside.

The poison needs a vein. Sometimes the state cannot find one. In November of 2022, Alabama dug in Kenny Smith's arms for hours, strapped to the gurney, until the warrant expired at midnight, then gave up. He lived another fourteen months. That failure is why the state chose him to be the first in history to die by gas. It had already tried the medical way, and its medicine had failed. Anthony Sanchez told the team the strap on his arm was too tight, that he could not feel the arm. At 10:15, a member of the medical team came back into the chamber to fix a sensor on a man who was already dying. At 10:19, they called it. The medicine had to be adjusted in the middle of the killing, in front of the witnesses. The state still called it a procedure. A nurse starts a line to save a life. The state starts one in the same arm.

The week before Texas killed Jamaal Howard, Tennessee had put two doses of the same drug into Christa Pike, and she lived. Texas went ahead with a supply it keeps, retests, re-dates. Jamaal had decided that if the drugs failed they would shoot him in the head. They did not fail. Nineteen minutes after the line opened, the state said 8:03. The clean kill the chemistry promises arrived for him two hours past the hour on the warrant, one week after the same chemistry had left a woman alive on a table in Nashville. Nobody in the room called it a failure, because the failure had happened to someone else.

Behind the Wall

The drugs come from behind a wall. The lines run from the man's arms through a hole to a room I have never seen. Someone in that room pushes plungers in an order rehearsed on a dummy. Behind the wall is where the state puts the hands, so that no one in the room can say who killed the man. The reading is public. The words are public. The push is private. The medical costume needs the wall, because a doctor at the bedside would be a killer at the bedside, and the state cannot afford that picture.

In Missouri, there was a line running underneath my elbow. The tube was labeled with a number two. When I saw the poison start to pass through it, I knew the execution was in full swing. The tube was so close. It was tempting. I did not touch it. The state had put the instrument of death within a priest's reach and trusted that the priest would keep his hands where he was told. I did. The tube has nothing to confess. I do.

The sheet covers the arms. It covers the lines. It hides the needle from the witnesses. It makes the man a shape: a face on a pillow, white below, the body abstracted into a form the eye does not read as a person. The church dresses the dead in white. The state does it before the man is dead, so that the killing happens under a shroud.

The Doctrine of the Painless Death

Here is the state's doctrine, in full, as it looks from a foot away. There is a way to kill a man that does no violence. Pull the sheet to the chin. Run the lines under it. Death can be given as a treatment, through a line a nurse would recognize, in a room lit like a clinic. The body will not object, or will not be

seen objecting, or will object under a sheet where objection does not count. The witnesses will go home saying peaceful. The family will go home saying justice. The technician will go home saying procedure. No one will have done anything to anyone.

The doctrine is a lie in every part, because there is no painless death that is also a killing. The body objects: Arthur's seventeen minutes, the colors in Scott's face, Emmanuel's snoring, the blue climbing Will's lips. The witnesses say peaceful because they were told to look for peace, and the technician was behind a wall. Someone did something to someone. I was a foot away, so I saw it.

In Alabama, Captain McKenzie yelled Casey's name and poked his face to check for consciousness, as if he were a dog. I had never seen such ignorance in person.

The doctor is the priest of the medical costume. His stethoscope is the aspergillum. His signature makes the killing a treatment. He hides his face because he knows the oath he took, and the oath does not have a line for the gurney.

God did not die painlessly. The gospels record the thirst, the cry, the blood, the hours. The state that executed him had a method too, the most efficient the empire could devise, and it did not pretend to be medicine. It pretended to be order. The lethal injection is the empire pretending harder. It has kept the cross and covered it with a sheet. It has kept the nails and called them lines. It has kept the soldiers and put them behind a wall. In Missouri the hole in that wall was the width of a tube. It was all the room needed to hide them. Condemned theology reads the gurney as the cross in a costume, and reads the costume as an admission: the state knows what it is doing well enough to dress it up.

The Cup

My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me (Matthew 26:39). Then, on the cross: they offered him wine mixed with gall, which he would not drink. Later, sour wine on a sponge, which he took, then said *It is finished* (John 19:30). The cup runs through the passion from the garden to the last breath. It

is the thing he asked to be spared, the thing he drank anyway, the thing he had handed his friends the night before as his own blood.

The poison is the cup. The state hands the man a cup through a line in his arm: a sedative it calls sleep, a paralytic it calls stillness, a drug it calls the end. He drinks it because he is strapped. Christ drank his because he was nailed. The cup passed to neither.

What the church has never said about the cup is that it was poison. It has spiritualized the cup into obedience, into a mystery of atonement. It was a drink the empire gave a dying man, bitter, in a sponge, to finish him. The lethal injection is that sponge, refined into a protocol. When I prayed the first half of Gethsemane all night before Dusty, take this cup away, I was praying the prayer God prayed about this exact cup, and it did not pass for him either. He drank the state's drink, said it is finished. The drink was not the end. God drank it, and it did not have the last word then. It does not have it now.

The gospels do not describe a painless death. They describe thirst, a loud cry, hours, the soldiers' impatience, the breaking of the legs of the other two to hurry them, the spear. The death of God was long, visible, violent. If God died in the flesh, then the death on the gurney is the death on the cross, again: with difficulty, for a length of time, in front of people. Arthur's seventeen minutes were the passion, again, in the flesh the Word had taken. The state's sheet is over the arms because the state does not want the passion seen. The gospel wants it seen. It wrote down the hours.

We do see Jesus, the letter to the Hebrews says, *now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone* (Hebrews 2:9). Taste. The word is the mouth's. The cup, the sponge, the sour wine. He tasted it. The letter says for everyone, not for the innocent, not for the ones who would repent. Everyone. The state administers death through a line, as a taste the man cannot refuse. The gospel says God tasted it first, for everyone, which means for this man, on this table, in this state. Not instead of him: the man still dies. For him. Before him. So that the taste in his mouth is a taste God has had. The poison was tasted so that the poison could be destroyed from inside the tasting.

The poison is the liturgy's most refined form, because it claims the killing is not violent, therefore not a killing, therefore not a place at all, and if no one did anything to anyone, there is nothing for God to be present in. Seventeen

minutes. Every color of the rainbow. Snores, blue, a foot shaking under a white sheet. Someone did something to someone, in a room, and God was in the room, at the foot of the gurney, in the body of a man who could not stop shaking, on the gurney too, in the body of a man who told the shaking one to be strong. The lie is that the death was painless. The pain had company.

Chapter 18

The Gas

The breath.

The Release

Before the first nitrogen execution in the history of the world, the State of Alabama handed me a page. It said, in the state's careful way, that the gas posed a risk to me in the chamber, that the state was not sure how big a risk, that if the nitrogen leaked I could be harmed, and that I released the state from blame. I signed it. I have said since that if Alabama wanted me to trust it, it should have sent the governor in with me. If the nitrogen leaked, she and I could go see Jesus together.

No spiritual advisor had ever been asked to sign a paper saying the execution might kill him too. The release is the state's confession about the method before the method was used. It did not know what it was about to do. It knew that it might do it to more than one person in the room.

Alabama had once passed a form through the row, years earlier, offering the men a choice: nitrogen, if they checked a box by a deadline. Anthony Boyd had. It was the only way Alabama could claim, when it strapped the mask on him in 2025, that he had chosen. Kenny had not chosen. The state chose him because its needle had failed in his arms, and it wanted a first. It is the doctrine of election, in the state's hands. The man is chosen by the state for a method the

state has never used, on the strength of a box checked in a different decade, or on the strength of a failure the state would rather not repeat. Scripture's election runs the other way. The one chosen is chosen by God, before he has done anything, for grace.

The Mask

When the guard opened the chamber door and I saw the mask for the first time, I gasped. It was a rudimentary firefighter's mask with a tube that led to the control center behind the wall. Straps attached to the gurney pulled it tight against Kenny's face. The skin around the rim was bunched grotesquely. His face was bright red with irritation before the gas even started. The state had already written on his face. Then it opened the valve. Sensing my horror, Kenny looked up through the plastic and said, we got this.

The mask is the method. It seals the face and replaces the air. It is the one execution device in this country that covers the man's face while the witnesses watch. It does the opposite of the hood. It lets everyone see the face at the moment the face cannot breathe.

The First One

I was the first spiritual advisor ever to stand beside that mask. The warden asked for final words. Kenny said them loud: Alabama causes humanity to take a step backwards. I'm leaving with love, peace and light. Then it was my turn at the end of the gurney. I wanted so badly to save him. I repeated the psalm three times, softly, the valley where death casts its shadow, making the cross on his shins each time, the only part of him I could reach. I knew that as soon as I stepped away the nitrogen would start. Can you imagine standing there, knowing that as soon as you move, someone you love is going to die? I walked away from Kenny for the last time.

We were told it would take seconds. When we were well past the seconds, I began to wonder what was happening. Kenny was trying to breathe. He was not unconscious. The gurney was not supposed to move, and it began to sway. He heaved back and forth. The restraints could not keep him still. Veins spiderwebbed across his body, as if millions of ants were running under the skin. His face. My God, his face. The force of his movement mashed it against

the clear front of the mask. Saliva, mucus, other substances shot out of his mouth, ran down the inside. Back and forth. It was minutes now, and he was conscious. I could see the horror in his eyes.

Taking off my glasses, I sobbed. I'd never felt so far away from God. I prayed that Kenny would know how much I loved him. I prayed that he would forgive me for not jumping on the gurney and ripping off the mask. I prayed it over and over: *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil* (Psalm 23:4, KJV).

After nearly ten minutes, the convulsions gave way to deep breathing, then to shallow breathing. There was no moment when I saw a last breath. After close to twenty-three minutes, the guards sprinted to close the curtain. I did not think Kenny was dead. I saw slight movements in his chest. Alabama does not pronounce a time of death in the chamber. No one who watched that execution could leave the room and say with certainty that Kenny was dead.

Alabama used the mask on other men between Kenny and Anthony. One of them was Greg Hunt, the pastor of the row, on the tenth of June, 2025. I had fought for him, delivered a petition to the governor, said in the press that Greg and his congregation knew more about the teachings of Jesus than the State of Alabama did. I was not in the chamber. The reporters saw a transparent mask strapped over a man who had declined his dinner tray, who shook his head no when asked for last words, who raised two fingers, who closed his eyes as they sealed the mask. His congregation was on the row behind the wall. The state killed the one man on that row who had been ordaining the others.

The row learned from the first one. Anthony Boyd, who had checked the box in 2018, spent his last hours turning his execution into a map. He practiced his breathing, he worked out a sign, and he told me, across the table, that his lungs were a sermon, that his legs would rise when he could go no further, that I must not look away, that his body would speak after the state cut the sound. This cannot happen again, he said. I will leave a map.

What Happened Instead

At 5:50 the curtain opened on Anthony Boyd, cruciform under a white sheet, with the mask on. At 5:56 the head guard called me forward, without warning,

and I held his hand for a moment, looked into the mask. He whispered: I love you, I've got this. I said we've got this. I told him to go to the light. He said I know, I will.

Anthony's entire being shot up. Then, I backed up a little. I wasn't supposed to be this close. I could hear the nitrogen. The guard barked, no, come back, come back, come back. I stepped forward into the perilous space, less than three feet from the mask, under his armpit. I murmured to Anthony without stopping: I love you. You've got this. Go to the light. Go to Christ.

His body convulsed forward against the restraints with a violence that shook the gurney. His face bulged. The whites of his eyes showed all around. Veins in his forehead swelled into ropes. His mouth opened behind the mask and I could see his teeth, his tongue, the gulping for air that was not air. His back arched. His fingers splayed, then clenched white, then splayed, grasping at nothing. His chest heaved as though the ribs would crack. The sound was a wet, ragged gasping, like fabric tearing.

At 6:00 I blessed him in the shape of a cross three times, then began to count. A dozen gasps by 6:03. Thirty by 6:05. Sixty by 6:07. Ninety by 6:09. His toes flexed like Morse code. His eyes tracked mine in bursts. A hundred and thirty by 6:11. A hundred and seventy-five by 6:13. Two hundred and ten by 6:15. At 6:16, past two hundred and thirty, the breathing shallow, still coming in distinct gasps, the body refusing.

Then his legs rose. Not the small movements I had tracked for nineteen minutes. Both legs together, slowly, then with gathering purpose, lifting off the gurney like a body trying to ascend and being pulled back by the weight of the nitrogen. The restraints at his ankles went tight. His legs rose until they looked like two ghosts suspended in the air, offerings, protests, prayers made flesh. They trembled. It was as if every ancestor who had been lynched, every person the state had ever executed, was speaking through those legs. Then they fell, like cut strings, crashing onto the gurney with a thud of flesh on metal. I knew. He had given everything. He had held them up as long as a human being could, as the sign he promised me.

His heart kept beating. The curtain closed at 6:27. The official time of death was 6:33. I know what those six minutes were. It was the longest nitrogen execution on record. I had counted more than two hundred and thirty separate

acts of conscious suffocation. What Alabama calls humane is a man suffocating while the state times it on a clock.

The state claims the man falls asleep. Seconds of gas, then unconsciousness, then death without pain. It called nitrogen humane before it had ever used it. Sleep was the promise. Two hundred and thirty gasps were the delivery. The state kept the receipt and called it a time of death.

Here the state did something new, and here the book's Christology sits. The cross was Rome's newest method: efficient, public, engineered for a slow death that would deter. God was executed by the most advanced killing technology the empire had, in the company of two other condemned men, on a warrant, with the charge posted. Nitrogen is the newest method of this empire. It was marketed as progress, until Kenny said it was a step backwards with the mask on his face. The incarnation did not choose an old-fashioned death. It walked into the state-of-the-art one. When I watched Kenny die, it felt like standing at the foot of the cross, except that this time the crowd did not weep. They took notes. They called it a fascinating new procedure.

He was crucified between two criminals, and the church has softened them into thieves, though Rome did not crucify thieves: it crucified insurgents, bandits, killers. God died in the company of murderers, by the newest method, on a schedule, with witnesses, and one of the murderers spoke to him. *Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise* (Luke 23:43). No baptism, no restitution, no hearing, no clemency board. Today. It landed on the man beside God while both were being killed by the state's best method, without a single condition met, the way Kenny was leaving with love, peace and light, the way Anthony was going to the light. I told him to. He said he would, while the state was still timing the gas.

The Breath

Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit (John 19:30). The word is breath. He handed over his breath. The gospel uses the same word for what God breathed into the dust at the beginning, for what the risen Christ breathed on the disciples in the locked room, for the wind at Pentecost. Spirit, breath, wind: one word. The incarnate God died by giving back the breath that was the first gift.

Nitrogen takes the breath. It does not stop the heart, or the brain, directly. It removes the one thing a body cannot live without from the air the body is pulling in, so that the man breathes, breathes again, without breathing. It is a method aimed at the Spirit. The state chose, as its newest method, the removal of breath, and breath is the biblical name for the presence of God in a body.

The one who gave up his breath on the cross gave it up freely. Kenny did not give his up: the state took it, over twenty-three minutes, through a mask. Anthony did not give his up either: he held it, counted it, shaped it into a sign. The difference between the Son's death and theirs is that theirs was taken, yet the same breath was in them, because the breath the state took from Kenny was the breath God breathed into Adam, the breath Christ handed over on Friday, the breath he breathed back into the room on Sunday. The state suffocated the Spirit-bearer. It had done it once before, on a hill, with different equipment.

On the evening of the first day, the doors being locked for fear, he came, stood among them, breathed on them: *Receive the Holy Spirit* (John 20:22). The first act of the risen Christ was to give breath to frightened people in a locked room. He gave back, in the resurrection, the very thing the state had taken on the cross, and he gave it to the ones who had failed him. This is the restoration the gas chapter needs. Without it, the chapter is horror and nothing else. Kenny's breath was taken in a locked room. Anthony's was taken while I counted. The gospel does not say the breath was never taken. It says the one who was suffocated by the empire came back into a locked room and breathed. The breath is restored, not by the state or the advisor but by the risen one, who knows what it is to have it taken, who gives it back to the room he was killed in, including the ones who opened the valve.

The Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered (Romans 8:26, KJV). Groanings: the sound behind the mask, the wet gasping, the tearing-fabric breath, the two hundred and thirty separate inhalations of something that was not air. I did not know how to pray in that room, and the apostle says that when we do not know how to pray, the Spirit prays, in groans. The groans in that room were prayer, not mine but his. The creation groans in labor, the apostle says. Labor, because something is being born. Anthony's legs rose like a body trying to ascend. I can only report that the text says it, that I heard the groans, that I did not know what else to call them.

I have not known peace since Kenny. I wake up gasping. I smell the rubber of the mask. The memory lives in my lungs. When Alabama scheduled Anthony, I did not know how to walk back into that place, the stark walls, the gloved hands, the hiss of nitrogen like a serpent. I walked back in. I believe in a God who breathes life into dust, not one who suffocates it. The state turned breath, the most basic gift, into a weapon. The two men it used it on turned the weapon into a sermon, one with a folksy drawl and one with his legs, in a room full of air that only they could not have.

Chapter 19

The Rifle

The spear, unseen.

The Method That Stops Pretending

I have not stood beside a firing squad. I say that first so that nothing in this chapter is mistaken for the kind of witness the rest of the book is. I have stood beside the needle twelve times and the mask twice. The rifle is the room I am waiting to enter. Idaho has built one. A man I write to, Thomas Creech, seventy-five, is scheduled to be its first, and I have said on the record that I intend to be beside him if the state permits. This chapter is written by a man with his hand on the door.

Here is what I know from the record, from the autopsies, from reporters who have sat where I have not. The firing squad is the method that stops pretending. No gurney dressed as a bed. No IV borrowed from the language of care. No mask that lets the state say the man fell asleep. There is a chair, a hood, a target over the heart, a slot in the wall, men with rifles who volunteered. Everyone in the room knows what is happening. That is the argument its defenders make. It is the one argument for an execution method I have found worth taking seriously before showing why it fails.

The Four Promises

Every method I have watched sold itself with the same four promises: certain, humane, honest, chosen. Nitrogen was going to be instantaneous, Kenny convulsed for minutes. Lethal injection was going to be medical, Arthur breathed for seventeen minutes. The rifle makes the same four promises.

In March of 2025, South Carolina shot Brad Sigmon, the first firing squad in the country in fifteen years. He chose it, in the sense the state allows choice: between a chair that had failed, a needle whose drugs the state would not identify, three men with rifles. In April, the state shot Mikal Mahdi, and the autopsy showed two entry wounds where there should have been three, below the heart, with damage to the liver. Witnesses heard him groan for the better part of a minute. The rifle's promise is certainty. His autopsy is the certainty breaking on a body, in the open, where it shows up. The needle fails behind a sheet. The mask fails behind plastic. The rifle fails in front of everyone. Its defenders call that honesty. It is the failure of a method unable to lie about its failures.

In the old tradition, one of the rifles holds a blank, and the shooters do not know which. South Carolina loads all three, then keeps the shooters' names behind a shield law. Either way, the state builds doubt into the killing so that each man may tell himself afterward that he may not have fired the shot. The blank is the state's theology of the executioner in one round. It says: no one did this. It is the same architecture as the hole in the wall, the hooded man beside me in Oklahoma. The rifle stops pretending about the killing. It keeps pretending about the killers. The blank is the sheet, pulled over the shooter instead of the shot.

A target is pinned over the man's heart, positioned by a person who walks up to the strapped man and locates the organ by feel. That person is not behind a wall. He touches the chest. He measures. Then he steps away. I have thought about that hand more than about the rifles. It is the hand I know: the one permitted on the body just before the killing. Mine goes to the shin to bless. His goes to the chest to mark.

The Doctrine without Cosmetics

Here is the rifle's doctrine, stated the way its defenders state it. Killing is what the state is doing, so it should look like killing, and the costume of medicine is a lie that lets everyone off. Put the man in a chair, let the shooters be men, then at least the state has told the truth about itself.

I find a version of that argument persuasive. I have written so. The bullet does not wear a lab coat. Candor about killing is better than a costume. It is still killing. The honesty of the method is not a mercy to the man. A man shot in the chest in a chair is not better off than a man on a gurney because the room admits what it is doing. Mahdi's minute was not shorter for being visible. The honesty benefits the witnesses, the state, the argument. It does nothing for the heart under the target.

Condemned theology has a stake in this because it has spent every chapter saying the state should tell the truth about its liturgy, and the rifle tells more of it. It confesses that this is a sacrifice, that there are priests, that they bear arms, that the offering is bound to a chair. But a confession that ends in a killing is not repentance: it is a more accurate heresy. The creed is the same, the vestments are camouflage. The state has removed the sheet and left the altar.

The rifle is also called clean, quick, and the word clean is the same word the needle used, the same word the mask used. It is the same lie in a different room. Whoever calls the chair clean has never been asked to wait with the body. The state that builds a rifle chamber has not stopped believing there is a place God's preference does not reach: it has decided to say so with less costume. The doctrine is identical to the one read over Kenny in a mask. This man is beyond it. Aim here.

The Spear

But when they came to Jesus and saw that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once blood and water came out (John 19:33–34). The gospel records a soldier's weapon entering the body of God to confirm death, and it records what came out. The church has meditated on the blood and water for two thousand years: the sacraments, the church born from the side.

The spear was the honest weapon of the passion. The nails were the method. The spear was the confirmation, made by a soldier who did not pretend it was anything but a spear. It is the rifle's ancestor: the state's steel, entering flesh, in the open, with no costume. The honest weapon was already used on God, and what came out of the wound it made was not only blood. I do not know what I will see in Idaho if the door opens. I know what the gospel says came out of the one honest wound the state made in the incarnate body. It was the beginning of the church.

The gospel adds that the spear came instead of the breaking of the legs, so the scripture would be fulfilled: *None of his bones shall be broken* (John 19:36). That is the law of the Passover lamb. The rifle aims at the heart. It leaves the bones, mostly. It is, in the grimmest sense, the method that keeps the lamb whole.

The gospel read the state's choice of a spear instead of a club as fulfilling the Passover, which means the gospel was willing to read the state's method as the shape of the sacrifice. If Idaho opens the door, the man in the chair will be the lamb, whole, with a target over the heart. The flesh in the chair is flesh he has taken. The church, if it is there, is standing at the doorpost.

The man is hooded. The state hoods him so that the shooters do not have to see a face, so that the last thing anyone sees is cloth, and the gospel hooded him too: they blindfolded him, struck him, said prophesy, who hit you. The hood is old. It is the state's way of making sure the offering cannot look at the priests, and it has not stopped the offering from praying for them.

What I Intend

I intend to be in that room. I have written to Idaho, to Tom, to the world. I know the room has been built in a way that may not have a place for a hand. The chair, the shooters' slot, the geometry of the space were designed by people who were not thinking about a spiritual advisor. I do not know how Idaho will resolve it. I intend to be the one asking.

I will not describe what I have not seen. I will say what I bring to the door. The same collar. The same Bible, open to the same three passages. The same oil, if they let me keep it. The same stubborn refusal to let a man die alone in a room the state built to prove he was not preferred. If the rifle chamber opens

for me, the chapter after this one will have a witness. Until then, this is a man waiting at a door, with everything the other rooms taught him, and a target pinned to the argument's heart.

CHAPTER 20

The Sign

The offering.

THE NOD

Someone gives a sign, and the killing begins. In Oklahoma, Chief Sparks reads the warrant, asks for last words, then something passes between him and the wall. In Alabama, Captain McKenzie gives a signal. In Missouri, nothing. The poison passes through the tube, and that is how you know.

Before Casey, Captain McKenzie gave the signal. Everyone leaned forward in expectation. Then Warden Raybon swung the door open from the control center and told everyone to stop. The look on his face was one of horror. They had almost started the execution without the witnesses.

A captain, a warden, a chief of operations, never the governor, the judge or the jury. The people who decided the man should die are not in the room, and the one who gives the sign did not decide. He is a middle manager of death. He gives the nod because the paper says the hour has come, because if he did not, someone else would. The state's chain is built so that the sign is given by someone with no authority to give it, on behalf of people who have the authority and are absent.

The Executioners Named

So, I name them by role, because the roles are what the state has left me: the governor who signed, the attorney general who sought the date, the warden who read, the captain who nodded, the team who strapped, twelve in Alabama, enough in Texas to leave bandages on a man's arms, the technician who found the vein, or dug, the one behind the wall who pushed, the one who opened the valve, the doctor who listened for the heart and wrote down a time, the guard who shoved me from behind, the men who mopped the room afterward, who were prisoners.

Every one of them is a killer by the state's own definition. Killing is what they did, in a chain, each holding one link so that no one held the whole. The book has said from the first page that they are inside the preference. This is the chapter where that has to be paid for. It costs the movement its villains.

Held Inside

The executioners are held inside the preference, not because they are secretly good or because it was only their job, but because the preference that reaches the murderer on the table reaches every hand that put him there, or it never reached the table at all.

This is the hardest sentence in the book for the movement I belong to, because abolition runs on villains: the warden with a record of abusing women, the governor who has never had to find a vein, the doctor who hides his face. All of that is true. Raybon is what Casey said he was, DeSantis has never watched what he orders, and the three medical professionals in Alabama walked past me hiding their identities because they know.

Every one of them is under the mark.

I hugged the assistant warden in Missouri in the parking lot because I wanted him to know they had not executed love, they had only caused it to grow. I hugged the agent in Texas because it was the most human thing I could think to do. I am not confused about what those men did that night. I am reporting where God was, which was on the gurney, reaching across the room toward them.

At the cross, a centurion, one of the men who carried out the execution, said: *Truly this man was God's Son!* (Mark 15:39). He said it after. He said it

with the deed done, with his own hands still on it. The gospel does not tell us he repented. It tells us he saw.

I have met the centurion. He was an assistant warden in Missouri who told me, before David died, that nobody in his right mind looked at that prison and thought it was the best we could do, that the distance to something better was money plus will, that it was his job, that he wished none of it had to happen. He asked me afterward whether I was okay, and it was a kind question. I said no. He was a guard in Alabama who muttered that these were the bad ones, that days like this stick to you. He was a woman behind dark glass in Missouri who put her hands together in prayer as I passed with my ID held up.

None of them stopped anything. The centurion did not take him down from the cross: he saw, and he said so, then he went back to the barracks. That is the executioner inside the preference, reached by seeing, not absolved by it. The gurney had reached across the room, and the room had seen it land. The centurion confessed. He did not bring a ladder.

Father, Forgive Them

The sign reversed, in the passion, was a sentence. *Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing* (Luke 23:34). It was said as the nails went in, to the men driving them. The Son gave the sign to his own executioners: not the sign to begin, which the centurion gave, but the sign of what the beginning meant, which was that they were already forgiven.

That sentence is the executioner's place in the preference. He is forgiven before he asks, he is forgiven while he does it, he is forgiven by the one he is doing it to, which is the only forgiveness that can reach the deed. The church has held that forgiveness in its liturgy every Good Friday for twenty centuries and has not applied it to the man behind the wall with his hand on the plunger. Condemned theology applies it. The one who gives the nod, the one who opened the valve on Kenny: father, forgive them. It was said over them on Friday, and it has not been withdrawn.

They know not what they do. That is no excuse. The soldiers knew they were crucifying a man. What they did not know was who. The captain who nods knows he is killing a man. What he does not know is who the man is, that

the sign he gives is being given over God. The Son forgave the ignorance of who. He did not pretend the nails were not nails.

They asked him for a sign. He said the only sign they would get was *the sign of the prophet Jonah* (Matthew 12:39): three days in the belly of the fish, then out. The only sign the state would get was his death and his return. Not a miracle to stop the execution. The execution, then what came after. The captain's nod begins a killing. The killing is the first half of the only sign God has offered the state. The second half is the third day. The state has never waited for the second half. It pronounces at the number and goes home. Anthony's legs were the sign of Jonah in the body. They rose, they held, they fell. The state saw a man dying. The sign says: three days, then the belly opens.

What does God do with the captain who nods? The gospel's answer is the centurion, and Paul, who gave the sign at a stoning by holding the coats, who approved, who then became the church's letter-writer. God does not exempt the one who gives the sign. God uses him. The hands that consented to Stephen's death wrote most of the New Testament. Chief Sparks once told the hooded man to back up so I could breathe. The one who gives the sign is, in the strange arithmetic of scripture, a candidate for authorship.

The Chain of Hands

The one behind the wall is the hardest case, because I cannot see him. He is the most anonymous person in the liturgy, and anonymity is the state's gift to him: no face, no name, no way for the man on the gurney to look at him. The grace that runs from the gurney outward has to go through a wall to reach him. It goes through the wall. Emmanuel told the men in the room that the scripture applied to them, but the man behind the wall could not hear it. That does not stop the blessing. The hole in the wall runs both ways. The lines carry poison in one direction. The words carry the other way, through the same hole, to a man with his hand on a plunger, whether he heard them or not. The preference is not conditioned on hearing.

The men gave signs too: Anthony Boyd's legs, raised and held there, trembling, so that I would know, so that I would tell the world; Emmanuel's hand; Steven's eyes on my face. The state's sign begins the killing, while the man's sign says what the killing is. It is the difference between the nod and the

legs. The nod is a middle manager's hand on behalf of people who are not there. The legs were a man's whole body, rising off an altar, speaking for everyone who came before him under a state's hand.

Every execution needs hands. A governor to sign. A warden to read. A team to find the vein. A public willing to call it ours, then look away. The chain of hands is the state's device for making sure no one did it. Condemned theology reads the chain the other way: everyone did it. The governor. The captain. The one behind the wall. The witnesses. The priest with his hand on the shin. Everyone in the chain is held. The preference goes down the chain link by link, from the gurney, through the wall, out the gate, to the public that voted for it, and it does not stop until it has reached every hand, because the man on the table blessed every one of them with the microphone open.

The sign that began the killing was given over God. God forgives the hand that gives it while it is still raised.

Chapter 21

The Time

The benediction.

The Moment Between

There is a moment between the last breath and the pronouncement. No one in the room knows how long it is. In Alabama, Kenny's chest moved after the curtain closed. In Alabama again, Anthony's heart went on beating after his legs fell, six minutes at least by the state's own clock, six minutes of a body clinging to existence while the nitrogen finished. In Oklahoma, Emmanuel snored, then stopped, and I had seen him leave. The doctor had not yet come in.

The moment between is the state's least controlled moment. It has scripted everything before it. It has scripted the pronouncement after it. In between, a body decides when it is done. The state stands there with its clock, waiting on the one thing it cannot order.

David went from grey to greyer throughout the execution. Then it was as if his entire body had turned to ash. One of the officers asked me to come out. I stopped and made the sign of the cross three times over his body. David looked more at peace than I had ever seen him look. Then I looked up to see myself in the mirror.

Then someone with a stethoscope. In Alabama, before that, a captain poked Casey's face and yelled his name to decide whether he was conscious. Then they said it was over at 6:47. The state later said 6:56. I have wondered since whether Casey was still alive when I was ushered out, whether it is possible to execute a man after the execution. I will never know.

The stethoscope sprinkles the killing with a diagnosis. A person trained to preserve life listens for its absence and signs a paper. The state keeps the stethoscope behind the curtain because the stethoscope is the point where the costume would tear if anyone looked. The instrument arrives after the witness. The state needs a stethoscope to know what the priest at the foot of the gurney saw with his eyes.

Then came the last words I had for Jamaal. There shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away. I prayed them in the chamber while the state did its work. The former things: a gun stolen from a grandfather, a videotape, a confession signed by a man who did not know the word appetite, a psychiatric unit, a maximum dose, glass between us for every visit we ever had, a warrant with a date on it, a table, straps, a final statement in pieces, the clock moving past six. He was alive when the hour began. He was not when it ended. I have said the verse every night since, outside, looking up, and I am still waiting for it to be true.

The Number

Time of death. The warden, or the chief, or a voice on a speaker, says a number, and that is the benediction of the state's mass. It dismisses the congregation. Go in peace, it says, meaning go. It tells the family behind the glass that the exchange is complete. It tells the advisor to make one last cross and go.

I have made it. Over Casey, one final sign of the cross before I was ushered out. Over David, three, as I stood, before I looked up into the mirror. Over Anthony, I tried, and a guard shoved me from behind. Over Emmanuel, a hundred times, before the doctor came. Over Steven, in every direction. The benediction is the only line in the night the state gives to the priest by accident. It says a number. I say a cross.

The state records the name beside the number. Casey McWhorter, 6:56. Anthony Boyd, 6:33. Emmanuel Littlejohn, a morning. Arthur Brown, close to seventeen minutes after it began. Steven Nelson, at Texas's supper hour. William Silvia, Dusty Spencer, at Florida's, while the rest of the state sat down to eat. The name at the number is the last thing the state writes about the man. It is the final line of the file. Then the file is closed. The state believes that the number is the end of the name. It has believed that about every executed man since the first, including the one whose execution had a placard with the charge written on it. That man's file closed at the ninth hour. The name did not.

What ends at the number? A body's warmth, Will's leg through thin cotton, warm, then not. A breath, Emmanuel's snoring. A fight, Anthony's legs. A wait, Dusty's thirty-four years. A voice, Steven's love, love, love. The state says: a sentence ends, justice is done, the case is closed, and every one of those is true in the state's sense. The state has ended what it could end, which is a body. It has not touched what it could not.

What Does Not End

Love never ends (1 Corinthians 13:8). I read that to Emmanuel at the end, squeezing his hand: you have been a good son, a good brother, a good uncle, a father, they all love you so much, that love is not going anywhere. Then the curtain opened. The state's number came a few minutes later. The love did not stop at the number. It was the one thing in the room the state had no clock for.

I should lose nothing of all that he has given me (John 6:39). I read that to Dennis Sochor over the phone the morning before Florida killed him, more than once. The whole economy of the empire runs on loss. It takes. It ends. It erases and calls the erasing justice. The gospel answers in two words: lose nothing. Dennis had spent his last week giving things away, his money, his grudges, his fear, like a traveler emptying his pockets before a crossing. He had learned you carry nothing across but love. He told me the far shore was lit, that he had been squinting toward it for years, that he could see it now.

The mark does not end. It was placed on the first murderer so that no one would kill him, and the state has killed fourteen marked men in front of me. The mark is still on them. Grace does not end, because it was flowing from the gurney before the number, and it does not require a pulse. The exegesis does

not end either, since Emmanuel's reading of John 8 is in this book. The state cut the microphone. It could not cut the transcript.

Anthony Wainwright asked me, in the cell, what happens to the ones he loved. Earlier that day, sitting with Sam, something had hit them both at once, like a bolt of peace from somewhere else. He wanted to know what it meant. I told him time is the thing that binds us here, that it does not bind us for eternity, that Sam would be there when he arrived, whatever day she died, because the soul never knows a time apart from the people it loves. How could heaven be heaven if everyone we love is somewhere else? Shit, Jeff, he said. I hope you're right. In the next room, the state's clock was running. He had stopped keeping it.

The last of the seven words before the surrender was a single word in the original: finished. The obvious sense is the one the state hears when the doctor pronounces, it is over, but the Son said it about his own death, from inside it, before the state could. He pronounced his own time. The state believes it has the last word at the number, while the Son took the word before the number, from the cross, in his own voice, and made the completion his act rather than the state's. *No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord* (John 10:18). The men have done this. Emmanuel: this is your release date, I said, and he took it. Dennis: my journey gurney. Kenny: I'm leaving with love, peace and light. Arthur: rest in power. They pronounced their own time, before the doctor, from the table, in their own voices, and the state still read a number afterward. The number was the state's. The finishing was theirs, which is to say it was the Son's, in the flesh he was wearing.

The Third Day

The third day he rose again. Everything the book has said about restoration rests on that clause, and the clause rests on an execution. The one who rose was the one the state had killed, certified, released, buried under guard. The resurrection is a specific claim: a man executed by the state got up, with the wounds, and that death, the state's instrument, had been undone from inside.

Restoration is not the same as rescue. The men were not rescued: the state killed them. Restoration is what the third day does to a body the state has finished with: it raises it, wounds kept, name kept, into a life the state has no

clock for. *Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have died* (1 Corinthians 15:20). First fruits, the first of a harvest, of the same kind. If the executed God is the first fruits, then the harvest is the executed, and they rise as he rose, from the state's tomb, with the marks.

The last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:26). Every rule, every authority. The state that kills is among the rules to be destroyed, and death, its instrument, is the last one. The restoration of all things is the doctrine that the third day did not happen to one body only: it happened to the first of a kind, and the kind is the executed. There is no one of that kind the harvest misses.

Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? (1 Corinthians 15:55). The apostle taunts it. He has just spent a chapter on the executed man who rose, and he ends by mocking the state's instrument to its face. The time of death is death's victory, as the state sees it. The number is the state saying: it worked, we have him. The apostle's answer is that death has been swallowed. The image is of death eating something it cannot digest. It ate the incarnate God on Friday. On Sunday it gave him back, and what it gave back was the first of a harvest that death will have to give back too. The men are in that harvest. Time of death was pronounced. The state has the number. Death swallowed them, in front of me, fourteen times, and twice more where the state kept me out. The apostle's word to the number is a question: where is your victory. I ask it of every certificate. The state has never answered it, because the only answer is the third day, and the state's protocol ends at the second.

The tradition's oldest image was of death taking the bait, caught on the hook: the grave swallowing the Son, then finding the Son could not be held. The state is the mouth in that image. It took the body of God, and the body came back out with the keys. It takes the bodies of the fourteen believing it has not yet been paid. It has been paid. The receipt is the empty tomb.

Universalism Owned

Here the book says the thing it deferred in the introduction, and says it without a hedge, because the rooms have now been walked.

If the preference is real for the murderer at the moment the state finishes with him, it is real for everyone. There is no one below that man for the preference to miss. He is at the bottom of every scale the church and the state have ever built. He killed. He did not, in some cases, repent. He was certified by a court as beyond reach. He was strapped, read to, gassed or poisoned, pronounced. And at every station, the room showed the preference landing on him: in Casey's eyes closed for forty-five minutes while the state fumbled, in Kenny's we got this through the plastic, in Emmanuel telling the officers around him that the verse was theirs too, in the love that did not stop at the number.

If it landed there, then hell was emptied on that gurney. I do not mean that God let him off. I mean that the doctrine of a place beyond God's reach was tested in the one room built to prove it, fourteen times, and failed. If the bottom is covered, everything above it is covered. The hand behind the wall in Missouri, which I never saw, is covered. The governor who signed from somewhere clean is covered. The guard who shoved me from behind after Anthony is covered. The people with the megaphones outside Starke are covered. The man in Texas whose evil I could feel in the room is covered. I am covered.

I could bracket this. The seminaries bracket it, out of fear of being called soft. I will not. I did not set out to write a universalist book. I set out to say what the room forced, and the room forced this. If anyone wants a hell, they will have to build one the way the state built the chamber, cinder block, a vault door, a knock in code, a clock on the wall, someone strapped inside, and then they will have to stand there with the clock. God has not.

The objection comes from the row itself, and it deserves an answer. Emmanuel, when I told him this was his release date, said: what if I told you I like it here, Jeff. He was joking, and he was also saying that the resurrection I was promising was mine, that his had to be his own. Arthur said he was not going to rest in peace, he was going to rest in power, because there could be no peace that night, while Anthony Sanchez told me I needed to be more violent, and gave me a dove spoiling for a fight. The objection is that universalism sounds like peace, and the row does not want peace: it wants the gurney overturned, it wants the executioners held to account. The answer is that universalism keeps no barriers to grace, in either direction, and that is different

from peace. A God who prefers the murderer does not therefore excuse the warden, because the warden is held inside the preference the way the murderer is: named, confronted, reached. Nathan still came to David. The rage of the row is part of the preference: it is what the preference sounds like when it is said from the bottom. Rest in power was a universalist sentence. It refused to let the state have the last word on Arthur, and it refused to let peace be the word either.

Scott is with his mother, whom he lost at eight months old, whose meeting comforted him on the gurney more than anything else. Arthur is home. He asked me to tell him about home while we waited, like waiting on a bus, and I told him. Will is in a really good long cartoon that never has to end, or in something better that he described that way because it was the language he had. Anthony Wainwright has seen Carmen running toward him. I do not know these things the way I know the number on the certificate. I know them the way the men knew them, from below the text, with a date on the wall. I have watched a soul float in Alabama. I have felt the rips in Oklahoma as a man pulled away from the table. Those are reports. The state has its number. The row has its release date. I believe the row.

The clock in the chamber kept running after the number. It ran while Kenny's chest moved behind the curtain. It ran the six minutes of Anthony's heartbeat. It is running now. The state built the room around a clock because it believes time is its instrument, and the one thing it cannot do is stop the clock at the number.

PART FIVE

After

CHAPTER 22

The Way Out

The dismissal.

THE GATE

The gate opens. In Alabama, outside, the sunlight hits the concrete with a glare so harsh it seems punitive, and on the way to the trailer I looked up, saw a sign on a building connected to the corridor: Tag Shop. The place where the license plates are stamped is a few yards from the chamber. I stood there and imagined blood dripping from every tag in Alabama, every car carrying an echo of what happened inside. No one outside the walls ever seeing it.

In Oklahoma, after Scott, the gate opened onto a cold morning. I walked back to the car and drove home. At night, it opens onto cold. After Steven, in Texas, the night swallowed me whole. Outside, the night pressed down thick, pressing against my lungs as if the atmosphere itself understood the grief lodged within me. My feet hit the pavement. I walked mechanically, my body moving while my mind remained trapped in that chamber, watching Anthony's legs rise, tremble, fall.

Before Kenny, I watched tins of food being carried in through the front door at Holman, with loud talk and laughter behind them. It was for the party after the execution. They were excited about the brisket. The state feeds the man once, at the start, and feeds itself at the end. The mass has a reception.

Complicity

I am complicit. The book has said so from the introduction. The way out is where the saying becomes a weight rather than a sentence.

After Scott, I wrote that I felt like an accessory to murder, that I had emotionally held someone down while the gathered killed him, that the death penalty turns all of us into killers. After Arthur, I wrote that I had watched a murder and done nothing to stop it. After David, I prayed that God would forgive me for doing nothing while a killing happened under my hand.

After Anthony, I dreamed that a woman was asking me why I had not stopped it, why I had not thrown myself on the gurney, ripped the mask off, fought the guards, screamed until they dragged me out. I had done everything else. I had held his mother's hand. I had given him the eucharist. I had anointed him. I had counted his breaths. She was not asking about the things I did. She was asking about the execution. I had no answer she accepted.

The state lets you go with your license and your keys, but it does not let you go with a clean conscience, because it has made you part of it. My name is on its paperwork, my presence certified its procedure. Every time, I chose to be there rather than leave a man alone, and the choice was right. It was not clean.

What the Witness Carries

There are two executions in every execution. There is the executed. There is something executed inside the witness. I think it is the belief that love can stop these horrors. It is also the only hope I have. I wake up after the nightmare. I believe I will wake up after the next one.

I carry the monster: it feeds on the soul, it learns each man's name. I carried twelve into the night before William, and there are fourteen now. There is no medication for watching the unforgivable and surviving it. The monster never leaves. It just makes room for more.

I did not want to change the tense. I wrote that the night before Jamaal died, in a hotel room with the phone face down, fighting the dawn. I have had to change it. People ask about him, I hear myself say was, and the word sits in my mouth like something I did not put there. When I close my eyes, he is still stumbling over his statement.

I carry a picture of Scott as a boy. Five boxes of Ben Cole. A dove spoiling for a fight. A finger that bled on a Texas grate. That is what the witness carries out. The state does not inventory it.

People ask how I keep doing it. The answer is presence. I was in prison and you visited me. Jesus attached no conditions to that sentence. He attached no exceptions either. He did not ask what the man had done. When you go to the one the state has thrown away, you are going to him. The garden and the death house are the same address.

I return because the men I am given the least time to know are the ones who never leave. Because Dusty was a stranger on Wednesday and a friend on Thursday. Nobody should die among strangers who came to kill him. Because David told me, the day before, that I had to keep on living, that a bunch of other folks out there needed me too. Because Anthony Boyd left a map and someone has to read it aloud. Because I have been in the chamber more times than anyone, which means I have the least excuse of anyone to stay home. Because the next warrant is already signed.

The Women and the Road

The gospel is careful about who was there at the end. The men had fled, Peter was in the courtyard, the women stood at a distance and watched: his mother, the other Marys, the ones who had followed him from Galilee. They watched him die, they watched where the body was laid, then they came back on the third day with spices, to do for the body what the state had not.

The women are the theology of the way out. They walked home from Golgotha with what I walk out with, the sight of it, the name, the weight in the stomach, and then they went back. The witness who stays through the killing and returns to the body is the one the resurrection is shown to first, not the ones who argued for him, not the ones who fled, but the ones who stayed at a distance, watched, went home, came back. The morning after, they were the church, because they were the only ones who knew where the body was. The church that sends letters and no one has not been to the tomb. It will not know where to look on the third day.

Two of them walked to a village that afternoon, talking about everything that had happened, when a stranger fell in beside them and asked what they

were discussing. They told him: a man was condemned to death and crucified. We had hoped. The stranger walked with them, explained the scriptures, and they did not know him until he broke bread at their table. Then he was gone. That is the road home from the chamber, six hours from Livingston, talking about it, or not talking. We had hoped. The executed one walks the road with the witness, unrecognized, explaining, until the table. He is on the road, not left behind in the chamber. The witness who thinks he is driving home alone from an execution is in the company of the one who was executed, who knows the road better than anyone, who will be recognized when there is bread.

On the beach, after the resurrection, the risen one made breakfast for the men who had fled, then asked Peter three times: do you love me? Three times, for the three denials. *Feed my sheep* (John 21:17). The failed witness was restored by the one he had failed, at a meal, with a question, then given work. The way out is where the witness has to be restored. The witness failed. I slept through the text at 2:48. I dozed in a corner. I did not pull the tube. I stepped back when told. I signed the paper. The advisor walks out having failed the man in the ways the disciples failed the Son: sleeping, fleeing, keeping quiet in the courtyard. The gospel's answer to the failed witness is breakfast, a question, a commission.

The men did this for me. Emmanuel: we would never have made it this far without you. Steven: you didn't fail. David: keep on living, others need you. That was the beach. The restored witness is restored by the one he failed, then sent back to the row, to feed the ones still there. That is why he returns, not because he is strong but because he was asked, three times, by someone with the marks, whether he loved him, said yes, then was told what to do about it.

The Voice

Once, they would not let me bring my body. Dennis Sochor, unsure of the rules, waited too late to request that I be there. So the last time I heard his voice, I was sitting at my desk at home with a phone on the desk, while one of the most sacred hours of a man's life reached me through a speaker from a cell hundreds of miles away. I have built my whole life on presence. This time, presence through static had to be enough.

Someone had granted us a handful of minutes, and a guard kept stretching them past what the rules allowed: even inside the machinery, someone being merciful with a clock. Every sentence carried the weight of maybe being the last one. I kept my voice level so his could stay level. To be a steady place for a dying man, you have to swallow your own breaking. He was already at peace when he answered. He said none of it touched him anymore, not the holding cell, not the fear. He had been tingling all day, he said, feeling the love coming at him from every side, and he had felt me with him before the phone rang. A dying man kept telling me not to worry about him. He was holding me.

I spoke to him about Patty Gifford. From Revelation: a new heaven, a new earth, the first things passed away. A new Patty. A new Dennis. Two souls the horror had set against each other, held at last in one light. He said he had felt it too. Then the line went quiet. Not long after, Florida bound a forgiven man to a gurney. A cord is not only severed at death. It is severed at birth. When they cut the line, they believed they were ending him. They were delivering him.

The world outside the gate is unchanged. Executions are scheduled for the hours when decent people are eating dinner or putting their children to bed, so William died at six in the evening while the rest of Florida sat down to eat. The machinery is built for a drowsy country: it does not require approval, it requires sleep. I drive home. The radio plays, there are gas stations, and no one at the pump knows where I have been. The tag on the car in front of me was stamped a few yards from a gurney. The world has not noticed that the state performed a mass in a small room and put a preferred man on the altar. It has not noticed that the altar spoke.

Then the phone rings. The row calls. Another man with a date. The night I got home from Dusty, William's warrant was weeks away. The way out leads to the next way in. That is the shape of this work. The state does not stop at fourteen. It has more names than I have years. The row calls, and the row is the church I belong to, the parish the church abandoned. I answer, because once, a man who thought he was the messiah told me I was the only one who did.

On Sunday, the church meets. It sings the psalms David wrote after the letter. It reads the epistles Paul wrote after the coats. It prays the prayer the executed man taught. It breaks the bread he broke on the night the state came for him. Then it goes home, and on Thursday the state kills a man at supper time. The church has not sent anyone.

I go home. The children are asleep in a room I walk into sometimes and stand in. I sit in a rocker in the dark. I cannot imagine anyone taking the life out of them, no matter what they did. Then I think about the man I just left, who was someone's child, whose mother answered him from the witness room, and I understand the mark of Cain the way the row understands it. Someone put a body between that boy and the vengeance. It was not enough. It was there.

Chapter 23

The Body

The burial.

Who Claims It

After the number there is a body, and someone has to claim it: a mother, a wife, a daughter who had not spoken to him in twenty years, an advisor, when there is no one else. The state asks, before the execution, who will take the remains, and it asks in the same tone it asks about the last meal. The answer goes on a form. The form has a line for it.

Will had already decided what would happen to his ashes, weeks before, on a phone that cut out whenever it cut out. Ben Cole's body went where the state sends the unclaimed. His life came to me in five boxes. Somebody who knew Scott as a child sent me his picture. That is a claim too. After Steven, I was taken to the small chapel where his body lay. I stood over him and prayed. God, thank you for Steven.

The state releases the body. It is the one thing it releases. It has held the man for thirty years, through glass, in whites, and once he is a corpse it hands him over with paperwork. The release is the state's admission that it never owned him, because you do not release your own property, you dispose of it. The state's own verb convicts it. The form says release, because the state, at the

last, cannot bring itself to say that the body was ever anything but a man's, on loan, now returned.

The sheet comes off. The whites are removed. The body is wrapped, or bagged, or dressed for a funeral home. The state undresses what it dressed. The church should be standing there with the linen.

Joseph of Arimathea brought linen, and that is nearly all the gospel says about him: a rich man, a member of the council that had condemned Jesus, who asked the governor for the body, wrapped it in clean cloth, laid it in his own tomb. A man of the state's own council claimed the state's victim. The church needs Josephs: it has never had enough of someone on the inside, with standing, who goes to the governor and asks for the body.

The Josephs I have known were mothers in witness rooms, a ninety-two-year-old woman in Alabama named Esther Brown who has spent her life beside the condemned, a few lawyers who cried on the phone. The state's council condemned him. A member of that council buried him. The ecclesiology of the body is that the church claims what the state has killed, without waiting to be asked, at its own expense, in its own tomb.

I have not been to most of the funerals. I know what a funeral for an executed man is like from the ones I have preached at, and it is like every funeral except for one thing: the pastor has to decide whether to say how he died. Most do not: they say he passed. The state has already had its say, and the church, at the graveside, lets it stand by not mentioning it. Condemned theology says it. He was executed by the State of Alabama on the twenty-third of October, he was killed with a mask, he raised his legs. The funeral is the church's chance to read the state's creed back to it over the body, then to answer it with the other creed. The family heard the word executed in the warrant, so they can hear it from a priest.

The Field with Numbers

Some bodies are not claimed. Texas buries them in a field with numbers. The stones say a number and a date. No name, or a name so small it might as well be a number. The state has a graveyard for the ones whose bodies it kept. It is the field of Genesis in the state's version: the blood cries from the ground, and the ground has a filing system.

I have stood in fields like that. I have walked two hundred miles across Texas with the executed haunting me by name, eighty-three miles across Ohio from the chamber to the capitol with their names in my mouth. The field with numbers is where the state's anthropology ends: a man is what can be listed, and when no one wants the list, the list goes in the ground with a number on it.

Resurrection as the Last Word on the Murderer

I told Emmanuel, in the chamber, that I believed in the resurrection of Emmanuel Littlejohn. I told Kenny to go to the light. I told Arthur, through glass, to see the light, become the light, be the light. Steven said love until he could not.

Resurrection is the last word on the murderer, and the church has been reluctant to say it about anyone but the innocent one. But the innocent one rose between two murderers, and he promised one of them paradise that day. The creed says he descended to the dead first. He went to the field with numbers. The resurrection rewarded no one for a good life. It was God's refusal to let the state's certificate be the last document in the file.

If God raises murderers, then the preference does not end at the number, and the state's whole liturgy, from the warrant to the field, is a liturgy performed over a body God intends to have back. I believe it because I have watched the light fall onto a gurney in Oklahoma and felt a man pull away from the table toward it, because a man in Florida who heard voices his whole life told me the light was real, that it was not a way of speaking. The more he spoke of it the more real it became.

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them (2 Corinthians 5:19). Peter, at the temple gate, speaks of *the time of universal restoration* (Acts 3:21). The last book says: *Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.* And: *See, I am making all things new* (Revelation 21:4–5). I have read that last passage over more gurneys than any other. Emmanuel's face relaxed at it. Dennis heard it over a phone.

Restoration is the doctrine that completes the passion. Suffering: the murderer suffers, and God suffers in him. Death: the murderer dies, and God has died that death. Restoration: the murderer is raised, because the one who

was raised first was the executed, and the harvest is of a kind with the first fruits. All things. The apostle did not write some things. He did not write the innocent things. The reconciling of the world was done without counting trespasses, which is the only way it could include the man whose trespass was a killing.

I told Anthony Wainwright that Carmen Gayheart would run toward him. I told Dennis that Patty Gifford would be there. Anthony Sanchez said it before I could: after the bread, the morning before Oklahoma killed him, he bet Juli Busken would be at the gates too. It is no sentimental picture. It requires the murdered to be restored to the man who killed her, and it requires God to have done the reconciling without waiting for either of them to agree.

He showed them his hands and his side. The restored body was the executed body, marked, because the restoration does not erase the execution: it carries it. The church has always known this about Christ and has never applied it to anyone else, so condemned theology applies it. The men rise with the marks, and so do the women they killed. Restoration is no clean slate, the state's fantasy. It is a new creation in which every wound is present, shown, touched, no longer the last thing.

That is why the second corpse was never justice. The state offered a second death to answer the first. God offers a first resurrection to answer both. The victim is honored by being raised, wounds kept, into a world where the one who wounded her has also been raised, wounds kept, the two held in one light. It is what the prophets promised, what the apostle wrote, what the last book saw, and the room showed me its beginning, every time, when the man on the table blessed the ones who were killing him. That blessing was the restoration of all things, starting early, from the gurney, before the state had finished.

The Firstborn from the Dead

He is the image of the invisible God, the letter says, *the firstborn of all creation* (Colossians 1:15), then: *the firstborn from the dead* (Colossians 1:18). Then the sentence the church has never dared to read at a graveside: *through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross* (Colossians 1:20).

All things, by the blood of his cross. The reconciliation of everything was accomplished by an execution: the state's instrument, the blood on the state's apparatus, was the means by which the estranged were brought back, all of them, not the deserving, all. The firstborn from the dead is the executed one, and firstborn implies siblings. The body that was claimed by Joseph, wrapped, laid in a tomb, was the first of a family of bodies the state has finished with, and the men are that family. When I stood over Steven in that chapel, I was standing over a sibling of the firstborn, in the condition the firstborn was in on Friday evening: claimed, laid out, waiting.

The last book describes the city. *Its gates will never be shut by day, and there will be no night there* (Revelation 21:25). The kings of the earth bring their glory into it. *The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations* (Revelation 22:2). The chamber door is shut: the vault door in Alabama, the coded knock, the slot in the wall, the locked witness room. The state's whole architecture is gates that shut, while the city at the end has gates that do not. The executed are not kept behind a locked door. The door the state shut on them opens onto a city where nothing is shut, where the kings who signed the warrants bring their glory in, having been made clean by the same blood as the ones they killed. I told Emmanuel this was his release date. I meant the gates.

So, the men rise with the wounds. Arthur with his ashen face. Kenny with the red bunched skin where the mask sealed. Anthony with the marks on his palm where he pressed the gurney. Steven with bandages on his arms. Will with the blue in his lips. The wounds are kept, so that anyone in eternity who wants to know what the State of Alabama did can put a hand in it. The wounds are the victims' too. Carmen Gayheart's. Karen Spencer's. Elizabeth Sennett's. Gregory Huguley's. A.J. and Patsy Cantrell's. Juli Busken's. Edward Lee Williams's. Janet Moore's. Sharath Pulluru's. Angela Gilpin's. Rodney Gilpin's. Kenneth Meers's. Clint Dobson's. Patricia Silvia's. Jose Guadalupe Tovar's, Jessica Quinones's, Audrey Brown's, Frank Farias's. Vickie Swartout's. The resurrection that keeps the murderer's wounds keeps theirs. Both are raised. Both keep their wounds. The reunion I told Anthony Wainwright about, a woman running toward the man in the distance, is a reunion of the wounded, and it is the only picture of heaven this book will draw.

Be the Mark

The church's job, at the end, is to be the mark of Cain: not the mark on the killer's skin but the mark as God placed it, a protection, a body between the murderer and the vengeance, a sign that whoever kills this man will answer for it. The church has spent its history reading the mark as a brand. It is a shield. God's first act after the first murder was to shield the murderer. The church, which claims to be the body of the one who was murdered by the state, has not put that body in the hallway.

Here is what being the mark would look like, in the rooms this book has walked. It would look like a church in the visitation room, at the table. It would look like Josephs at every governor's door asking for the body before it is a body. It would look like a congregation that knows the name of the man on Death Watch this week and says it aloud on Sunday. It would look like a body in the corridor between the holding cell and the vault door, so that the captain who gives the nod has to give it through a church.

It would look like what one man has done, again and again, in a robe, with a Bible, with oil, which is not nearly enough, yet more than the church has done. I am not the mark. I am a smudge of it. The book ends by asking the church to become the thing it has been reading about since Genesis four, so that the next man walked to the door has to be walked through the body of Christ to get there, and so that the state, which has never been made to answer the first question God ever asked a killer, hears it at last in the hallway. Where is your brother Abel?

Conclusion

The Preferential Option for the Murderer

The principle, stated at last.

The Room

The room is small. It was small in Oklahoma, where a hooded man stood beside me, small in Alabama, where it took twelve guards to strap a man down, small in Missouri, where the walls were mirrors and I watched myself watch, small in Florida, where a mirror hung over the gurney so that no one could say they had not seen, small in Texas, where a man shook his foot under a sheet. Fourteen times the door opened. Fourteen times a man was on the table before I got there. Fourteen times I walked out and he did not.

The room was built to prove that God's love stops somewhere, and that the state has found the place. Fourteen times I stood in that place. God had not stopped. The calm that came over most of the men came from somewhere the state had not sealed. The blessing that went from the gurney to the warden crossed a line the state said could not be crossed. Anthony's legs rose off a table built to hold him still. Everything the state built the room to disprove happened in the room, with the microphone open. Then the state wrote down a time and called it a procedure.

The Doctrine

God prefers murderers.

I kept the sentence out of the chapters and let the rooms say it. Now it can be said in full. The preference is where God's eye goes first, before the verdict, before the apology, before the file is read, and it goes to the bottom, which is the man who killed. It does not wait for the turning. It is what turns. It was on Scott before the door opened, on Kenny under the mask, on Jamaal while he looked at the people around him and could not say why they were crying.

Execution is the sermon preached against that. It is a doctrine about where love stops, delivered in a liturgy, with the authority of a state behind it: cinder block for a nave, a microphone on a cord for a pulpit, chairs in rows behind glass for the faithful, and a murderer on the altar to prove the doctrine true. The murderer proved it false, every time, with the microphone open. Then the state cut the microphone and called the proof a procedure.

Condemned theology is theology from where the condemned are, not about them. The men were the ground I stood on to look at God: a shin, an ankle, a shoulder, a head, a leg warm through cotton. What I saw from there I could not have seen from anywhere else. The chair sees the chair's God. The row sees the row's.

Its sources are four. Scripture, read from below, by men with a date on the wall: Cain marked, Moses at the bush, David with the letter, Paul with the coats, Barabbas released, the criminal promised paradise, the executed God between two murderers, the veil torn, the wounds kept. The room, taken as given the way a physician takes a wound. The condemned, as exegetes, whose readings are the scholarship. The advisor's own body, which is not clean, which shook at the door, sobbed at the mask, slept through the text at 2:48, which was blessed by the men it failed. Four sources, none of them a library. No theologian is named in this book, because the theology was forced by a room, and the room had no bibliography.

A human being is the one God keeps choosing after the act. The murderer is the human's clearest instance, because in him the choosing rests on nothing but the choosing. The state's anthropology is the inventory: a man is what can be listed, boxed, dressed in white, buried under a number. Five boxes on my floor at three in the morning: rags, hair clippings, pages of numbers no one

could read. God's anthropology is the mark: a man is the one whose killing will be answered, even when he is Cain.

The Christology

God was executed by the state, on a warrant, with witnesses, by the newest method the empire had, in the company of murderers, with the charge posted. He was hooded and struck. He was given a last drink. He said seven things into the state's air, and the church made them a liturgy. He descended to the dead, which is to say he went to the field with numbers, then he rose with the wounds kept. He promised paradise to a criminal without a hearing, the same day.

Every chamber is Golgotha: McAlester on Choctaw land, Holman in the pines, the room of mirrors at Bonne Terre, the mirror over the gurney at Starke, the dungeon with two windows at Huntsville. That is a claim about where God is: on the table, in the mask, under the sheet, in the company the state has chosen for him, reaching from there toward the ones with the plungers.

The murderer suffers. Kenny could not keep food down in the weeks before the mask, Anthony Boyd called the date torment, Michael texted at 2:48 in the morning, Jamaal asked why everyone was crying, and the state does not count any of it, because it is the suffering of the guilty. The tradition said God could not suffer. The room says God suffers in the guilty, as the guilty, on the gurney, under the sentence, with the lines taped in, in flesh the Word has taken for his own.

The murderer dies. The state kills him, with a mask, with a line, at supper time. The tradition said the Son died in his human nature, to keep God from dying, and the room does not allow the distinction, because the Word took flesh, the flesh died, the death was the state's method: the cup, the breath taken, the honest wound. God died the state's death, so that every time of death pronounced over one of the fourteen was pronounced over a death God has died. Casey, 6:56. Anthony, 6:33. Anthony Sanchez, 10:19. Jamaal, 8:03. The number is the state's, and the death is his. The state is right that someone is dying. It is wrong about who.

The murderer is raised, not rescued. The third day is the specific claim that a man executed by the state got up, wounds kept, the way Thomas was told to

check. Restoration completes the preference. A preference that landed on the murderer and then let the state have the last word would be pity. A preference that raises him is the incarnation finishing what it started in the cell. The murdered are raised too, with their wounds, into the reconciliation done without counting trespasses. That is the end of the book's universalism, and it is no soft doctrine that no one is lost. It is the hard doctrine that everyone the state has ever put on a table rises with everyone the table was built to avenge: Carmen running, Patty found, Juli at the gate.

The Church

The church is the mark of Cain, or it is nothing: the body God puts between the murderer and the vengeance, Simon under the beam, Joseph at the governor's door, the friends told to stay awake, the parish on the row that ordained itself when no bishop would come. A church that sends letters to a clemency board and no one to the visitation room is the crowd. A church that breaks bread on Sunday and does not know the name of the man on Death Watch on Thursday has forgotten what the bread was: a last meal before a state killing.

The tradition has a phrase for the church joined to its head, the whole Christ, meaning what is done to the members is done to the head. *Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?* (Acts 9:4). The risen one said it to a man who had never touched him, who had only touched his people. Condemned theology extends the whole Christ to the row, where the men are members, not honorary members, not members if they repent, but members, because the head said I was in prison. What the state does to the members it does to the head. Why do you persecute me? The question was asked of Saul, and it is asked of every governor, warden, captain, valve. The whole Christ rises together. The head has risen, the members will: a body, executed in its members over and over, whose head has already come out of the tomb, dragging the body after him, wounds included, the murderers with the murdered in one flesh.

Go to him outside the camp. The church has known the address since the first century. It has painted it, sung it, preached it, stayed home. The Son is being killed again this Thursday at the supper hour, in Holman, in Starke, in

McAlester, in Huntsville, and the only question the gospel asks the church is whether it will be found there when the curtain opens.

What It Asks

It asks the state to read its own liturgy and see what it confesses, the governor who signs to walk into the room, the captain who nods to know whose sign he is giving. It asks the state to answer the first question God ever asked a killer, which the state has been asking of murderers for three thousand years without once being asked it in return. Where is your brother Abel? He is on the gurney. You put him there. Now answer.

Of the victim's family it asks nothing. Rachel is permitted to refuse comfort, because the rage is God's to keep, and God keeps it. What the book asks is of everyone who has spoken to them: stop lying, stop telling them a second corpse will weigh what the first one weighs. Tell them that their dead are heard, completely, by a God who was himself murdered, and that the room the state built in their name is a monument the state built to itself. Then sit with them, then stay awake.

The men. Fourteen names on fourteen certificates, and two more I was kept from. Greg Hunt, who pastored a parish the church would not visit, killed by a mask while I stood outside. Dennis Sochor, who fasted to look at the woman he loved, killed while I held a phone. The book cost them everything, and they did not write it. They are its authors. It cost the victims, who were dead before the book began, who are in it because a theology that skipped them would be a lie. It cost me less. Sleep. A finger's worth of blood. The monster, fourteen times over. It is not enough to claim the book. The murderers claim it. I only stood where they could reach me.

I Was in Prison

I have kept the sentence for the end, because it is the judgment. When the Son of Man comes, the nations will be gathered, and the question will not be about doctrine. It will be: I was in prison, and did you come? The righteous will not know when they saw him there. The others will not know when they did not.

That sentence puts the whole book under judgment, including its author. I came, though I was not clean when I came, though I did not stop the killing,

though I signed the state's paper to get in, and I have said all of that. But I came. The King was in the cell, and the gospel says the visit is the audience. Every hour through the glass, every hallway of cats, every hand on a shin was that audience, whether or not I knew it at the time, and that is the only defense I have at the judgment. It is the only one anyone will have.

The church will be asked the same question, and so will the state, so will the governor who was somewhere clean, the warden who read, the public that ate dinner. I was in prison. It is an address, not a metaphor, because the one who said it was executed there, by the state, with witnesses, then rose from the state's tomb with the wounds, taking flesh in the cell ever since, waiting to be visited or not. The state has built a room to prove he is not there. He is there. I have put my hand on him. He blessed me.

The door is open. There is a warrant on a clipboard somewhere, signed, with a name on it I have not yet learned to say. The row will call. When it does, I will drive a road I have learned to hate. I will hand my license to a woman who hates me. I will take off my robe and spin around. I will walk through the doors in the order they slam, climb the steps, meet the hooded man, hear the knocks, four quick, two slow. I will go through. I will put my hand where the warden permits on a man the state has certified as beyond reach, and the state will read its creed over him while he turns his head the few inches the straps allow. Then, before the state can finish killing him, he will do the one thing the room was built to prove impossible.

He will bless me. He always does. Then the state will write down the time, call it a procedure, and the blessing will already be out of the room, carried down the hallway in the only body the state let in, out through the gate, into a country eating dinner, where I will say his name until the chamber calls again.

Postscript

Through the glass.

Jamaal Howard was executed in Huntsville, Texas, on the seventh of October, 2026. He was the fourteenth. He was convicted of the murder of Vickie Swartout.

Texas keeps its condemned behind glass. For a year I could not shake his hand, or put a hand on his shoulder when he was afraid, or pass him anything of mine. So, the afternoon before, I bought a honey bun and a bottle of Powerade from the vending machines, then handed them to a guard to carry back to him.

This is my body. Jamaal held the honey bun. He opened the wrapper himself. He broke it with his own hands. This is my blood. He lifted the Powerade to the heavens and drank. There was no altar, no chalice, no rail. The prison stayed a prison. The glass stayed glass. Christ was there.

Jamaal did not understand what Texas was going to do to him. Christ met him anyway, on the far side of the glass, in a pastry from a machine. The state decided everything about that room, where he sat, when the guard crossed it, when the lights came on. It could not decide what passed between Jamaal and God while he ate.

About the Author

Jeff Hood is a theologian, author and death row advocate. He is the founder of the Execution Intervention Project. He has accompanied fourteen men into the execution chamber across five states, more executions in more states than any other spiritual advisor in the country, including the first nitrogen execution in the history of the world. He is also the only spiritual advisor to have sued his way into an execution chamber.

His work has been profiled in USA Today, Newsweek, GQ, the Miami Herald and Rolling Stone, which made a documentary about him titled The Spiritual Advisor. He was recently nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work against the death penalty.