

THE BALLAD OF
CUMMINS PRISON

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS

*a Complicit Press series of classic texts
reset in contemporary American contexts*

edited by Jeff Hood

THE ABOLITION CLASSICS

V. 18

THE BALLAD OF
CUMMINS PRISON

after The Ballad of Reading Gaol

OSCAR WILDE

Reset in Grady, Arkansas by

JEFF HOOD

COMPLICIT PRESS

2026

The Ballad of Reading Gaol was first published by Leonard Smithers in 1898 under the name C.3.3 and is in the public domain. The original text is available through Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive.

This volume is not a reprint of Wilde's poem. It is an original composition that resets the poem at the Cummins Unit, Grady, Arkansas, in the era of lethal injection.

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In Memoriam

C.T.W.

Sometime Trooper of the Royal Horse Guards.

Obiit H.M. Prison, Reading, Berkshire,

July 7th, 1896

and for every man with a date

FOREWORD

Oscar Wilde watched a man wait to die. So have I.

Wilde watched from a cell in Reading Gaol. He was prisoner C.3.3... Block C, landing three, cell three. The State took his name before it took anything else. From that cell he watched Charles Thomas Wooldridge walk the yard. Wooldridge was a trooper of the Royal Horse Guards. He had cut his wife's throat. On July 7, 1896 the prison hanged him and buried him in quicklime inside the walls.

Wilde never got over it. Neither have I.

I have sat with the condemned in their last hours. I have prayed with them through the glass and past the glass. I have watched eleven human beings die at the hands of the State. I have watched the gurney. I have watched the straps. I have watched the line run clear and then run death. I have watched chests heave. I have watched eyes refuse to close. There is no clean way to kill a human being. There is only killing.

We tell ourselves the needle is progress. We retired the rope. We retired the chair. We kept the killing. The Ballad knows better. The Ballad knows the machinery is a costume. The machinery changes... the sin does not. Each age dresses death in its own uniform and calls the tailoring mercy.

So I brought the poem home. To Arkansas. To the Delta. To the farm at Cummins where my state does its killing. The men there wear white. The fields there grow food. The chamber there

waits. In April of 2017 Arkansas set out to kill eight men in eleven days because its drugs were expiring. It killed four. Sit with that sentence. The clock on the poison mattered more than the men.

Wilde wrote that each man kills the thing he loves. I believe the State kills the thing it fears. And what the State fears most is the truth that the man on the gurney is its brother.

Read this poem slowly. Read it like a vigil. When you reach the stroke of eight... stop. Somewhere a clock is always striking eight.

The condemned taught me how to pray. This book is one of those prayers.

Jeff Hood

North Little Rock, Arkansas

EDITOR'S NOTE

THE POET

Oscar Wilde was the most celebrated writer in London when the State took him. In May 1895 he was convicted of gross indecency and sentenced to two years at hard labor. He served the last eighteen months of that sentence in Reading Gaol, where the system erased his name and issued him the address of his cell: C.3.3, third cell, third landing, Block C. In the summer of 1896 the prison hanged Charles Thomas Wooldridge, a thirty-year-old trooper of the Royal Horse Guards who had killed his wife. Wilde never spoke with him. He saw him in the exercise yard, a man in shabby clothes looking up at the sky, and the sight never left him. Released in May 1897, Wilde crossed to France that same night and never returned to England. He wrote the Ballad that summer and fall in Berneval and Naples. Leonard Smithers published it in February 1898 with C.3.3 printed on the cover where the author's name should have been. It was the last work Wilde completed. He died in Paris in November 1900.

THE POEM

The Ballad runs one hundred nine stanzas in six sections. Its stanza is the old English ballad quatrain grown to six lines, alternating four beats and three, rhyming on the even lines. The

form is a folk form... the meter of the broadsides once sold in the crowds at public hangings... and Wilde chose it deliberately: a poem against execution written in the meter of execution entertainment. Its argument moves outward in rings, like the prisoners circling the yard, from one man's death to the watching men, to the prison, to the Law, to Christ. Its most famous line indicts every reader before the first death occurs: each man kills the thing he loves.

THE ADAPTATION

This volume is not a reprint and it is not a translation. It is a resetting, and the resetting goes all the way down into the language. The poem here speaks the plain American English of a modern execution, because the reader should never be allowed the comfort of distance... the comfort of believing this happened long ago, in another country, in another tongue. The lines every reader carries, each man kills the thing he loves, the little tent of blue which prisoners call the sky, the kiss of Caiaphas, stand essentially untouched, because they were already written in the language of forever. Around them, the Victorian furniture has been carried out: the casque and the anodyne, the gyves and the seneschal, the demirep and the rigadon are gone, and in their place stand the deathwatch log, the alcohol swab before the needle, the warrant, the witnesses behind the glass and the whisper that travels every American row... that fellow's got a date.

The machinery has been brought forward with the language. The rope becomes the line. The scaffold becomes the gurney. The hangman's gardener's gloves become latex. The drop becomes three drugs pushed in sequence. The dawn hanging becomes the

evening execution, and the stroke of eight becomes eight o'clock at night, when American states do their killing. The quicklime grave inside the walls becomes the fresh-turned delta clay of a prison cemetery and a marker with a number where a name should be. Reading Gaol becomes the Cummins Unit outside Grady, Arkansas, a working prison farm where men still walk the line in the fields and where the State of Arkansas keeps its death chamber. The trooper's scarlet coat becomes Army greens.

One liberty should be named. In Arkansas the men under sentence of death are held at the Varner Unit and moved to Cummins to be killed. The poem sets condemned man and narrator inside one set of walls, sharing one yard, because the poem's theology requires it. Wilde took the same liberty. He and Wooldridge never shared a yard either. Witness compresses distance. That is what witness is for.

Wilde's gothic machinery, the dancing phantoms, the cock-crow, the kiss of Caiaphas, the pilgrim's staff that bloomed in the Pope's sight, has been kept and set in today's speech. It is doing theological work that no update could improve, and it needed no antique words to do it.

A NOTE ON THE FORM

The stanza count, the six-line stanza and the ballad music of the original are preserved throughout... one hundred nine stanzas here for one hundred nine there, ring for ring. The rhymes are kept wherever modern English would carry them and allowed to loosen into slant rhyme where an exact rhyme would have dragged the old diction back in. The reader who sets this volume beside the 1898 text will find the two poems walking the same yard, stanza for stanza, one in rope and one in needle, one in

Victorian dress and one in county-issue gray.

THE SERIES

This volume is the eighteenth in The Abolition Classics, a Complicit Press series of classic texts reset in contemporary American contexts, edited by Jeff Hood.

THE BALLAD OF CUMMINS PRISON

THE BALLAD OF
CUMMINS PRISON

I

He wasn't wearing Army greens,
For blood and wine are red,
And blood and wine were on his hands
When they found him with the dead,
The poor dead woman that he loved,
Murdered in her bed.

He walked among the sentenced men
In county-issue gray;
A ball cap pulled across his eyes,
His step still light some way;
But I never saw a man who looked
So hungry for the day.

I never saw a man who looked
With such a longing eye
Up at that little tent of blue
The prisoners call the sky,
At every drifting cloud that went
Dragging its silver by.

I walked with other souls in pain
 Inside another gate,
Wondering what the man had done,
 Something small or great,
When a voice behind me whispered low,
 “That fellow’s got a date.”

Dear Christ! the very prison walls
 Seemed to spin and reel,
And the sky above my head came down
 Like a helmet of hot steel;
And though I was a soul in pain,
 My pain I could not feel.

I only knew what haunted thought
 Quickened his step, and why
He stared so hard at the plain gray day
 With such a longing eye;
The man had killed the thing he loved,
 And so he had to die.

Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
 By each let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
 Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
 The brave man with a sword!

Some kill their love when they are young,
 And some when they are old;
Some strangle it with wanting flesh,
 And some with wanting gold:
The kindest use a knife, because
 The dead so soon grow cold.

Some love too little, some too long,
 Some sell, and others buy;
Some do the deed with many tears,
 And some without a sigh:
For each man kills the thing he loves,
 Yet each man does not die.

He does not die a death of shame
 On a scheduled, printed date,
Strapped down against a padded board
 While the witnesses sit and wait,
Staring up at ceiling tile
 And the cameras of the State.

He does not sit with silent men
 Who log him night and day;
Who watch him when he tries to weep,
 And when he tries to pray;
Who watch him so he cannot rob
 The prison of its prey.

He does not wake at dawn to find
The team inside his room,
The chaplain shaking with his book,
The Warden gray with gloom,
The Director in a pressed black suit
With the yellow face of Doom.

He does not stand in paper clothes
While a doctor maps his veins,
Noting every twitch he makes
On a clipboard, taking pains,
Checking a watch whose little ticks
Fall on him like chains.

He does not know that sickening thirst
That sands your throat before
The tie-down team in latex gloves
Comes through the steel-framed door
And cinches down the nylon straps
So the heart can beat no more.

He does not bow his head to hear
His own death warrant read,
Or, while the terror in his soul
Screams that he isn't dead,
Ride his own gurney down the hall
Into that hideous shed.

THE BALLAD OF CUMMINS PRISON

He does not stare into the lights
 Above the one-way glass;
He does not pray with lips of clay
 For his agony to pass;
Or feel upon his shuddering cheek
 The kiss of Caiaphas.

II

Six weeks our soldier walked the yard
In county-issue gray:
His ball cap pulled across his eyes,
His step still light some way,
But I never saw a man who looked
So hungry for the day.

I never saw a man who looked
With such a longing eye
Up at that little tent of blue
The prisoners call the sky,
At every wandering cloud that trailed
Its unraveled cotton by.

He did not wring his hands like men
Too frightened for despair,
Who try to raise the child called Hope
In a cave with no more air:
He only lifted up his face
And drank the morning air.

He did not wring his hands or weep,
 He did not mope or whine,
But drank the air as if it ran
 Like an IV in his line;
With open mouth he drank the sun
 As if the sun were wine!

And I and all the souls in pain,
 Who tramped inside the gate,
Forgot whatever we had done,
 The small things and the great,
And stood and watched, amazed and dumb,
 The man who had a date.

And it was strange to see him walk
 So easy in the light,
And strange to see him drink the day
 With such an appetite,
And strange to think of what he owed
 And how they'd call it right.

For oak and elm grow pleasant leaves
 That every springtime shoot:
But grim to see is the death house wall
 With its razor-wire root,
And, green or dry, a man must die
 Before it bears its fruit!

The highest seat in all the land
Is the one the mighty try:
But who would lie in nylon straps
On a gurney cranked up high,
And through fluorescent glare take in
His last look at the sky?

It's sweet to dance to violins
When Love and Life are fair:
To dance to fiddles, dance to flutes
Is delicate and rare:
But it is not sweet, with strapped-down arms,
To drown in open air!

So with curious eyes and sick unease
We watched him day by day,
And wondered if each one of us
Would go the self-same way,
For no one knows to what red Hell
His blinded soul may stray.

At last the dead man walked no more
Out with the sentenced men,
And I knew that he was lying down
In the death house holding pen,
And that I would never see his face
In God's sweet world again.

Like two doomed ships that pass in storm
 We had crossed each other's way:
But we made no sign, we said no word,
 There was nothing we could say;
For we did not meet in the holy night
 But in the shameful day.

A prison wall was around us both,
 Two outcast men were we:
The world had pushed us from its heart,
 And God had let us be:
And the iron trap that waits for Sin
 Had closed on him and me.

I I I

In the death house yard the ground is hard,
And the chain-link fence is high,
So that was where he took his air
Under a leaden sky,
And an officer walked on either side
For fear the man might die.

Or else he sat with those who logged
His anguish night and day;
Who watched him when he rose to weep
And when he knelt to pray;
Who watched him so he couldn't rob
Their table of its prey.

The Warden knew the protocol
Down to the smallest fact:
The Doctor said that death was just
A medical act:
And twice a day the Chaplain came
And left a little tract.

And twice a day he called his folks
And kept his voice steady and clear:
His soul was set, and there was no place
Left in him for fear;
He'd tell you he was glad, almost,
That the needle's day was near.

But why he said a thing like that
No officer dared to ask:
For the man whose shift it is to watch
Is given a single task,
To keep a lock upon his lips
And make his face a mask.

Or else he might be moved to try
To comfort or console:
And what is Human Pity worth
Penned up inside the Hole?
What word of grace, in such a place,
Could help a brother's soul?

With slouch and swagger around the ring
We walked our fool's parade!
We did not care: we knew we were
The Devil's Own Brigade:
Shaved heads, dead eyes and feet of lead
Make a fine masquerade.

We hoed the rows, we picked the beans,
 With split and bleeding nails;
We mopped the floors and wiped the doors
 And polished the steel rails:
And rank by rank we walked the line
 And rattled with the pails.

We baled the hay, we broke the ground,
 We turned the dusty drill:
We banged our trays and hollered hymns
 And sweated on the hill:
But in the heart of every man
 Terror was lying still.

It lay so still that every day
 Crawled like a weed-choked wave:
And we forgot the bitter end
 That waits for fool and knave,
Till once, as we tramped in from work,
 We passed an open grave.

With yawning mouth the yellow hole
 Was begging for a thing;
The very mud cried out for blood
 To the thirsty gravel ring:
And we knew before another dusk
 The State would have its killing.

In we went, our souls locked down
 On Death and Dread and Doom:
The medical team with little bags
 Went shuffling through the gloom:
And every one of us shook as he stepped
 Into his numbered tomb.

That night the empty corridors
 Were full of shapes of Fear,
And up and down the iron block
 Walked feet we could not hear,
And through the bars that hide the stars
 White faces seemed to peer.

He lay like someone lying down
 In a soft and open land,
The watchers watched him while he slept
 And could not understand
How anyone could sleep that sweet
 With the death house close at hand.

But there's no sleep when men must weep
 Who never yet had wept:
So we—the fool, the fraud, the thief—
 That endless vigil kept,
And through each brain on hands of pain
 Another man's terror crept.

It is a fearful thing to feel
 Another man's guilt!
For, right inside, the blade of Sin
 Sank down to its hilt,
And the tears we cried were molten lead
 For blood we never spilt.

The officers in soft-soled shoes
 Slipped past each bolted door,
And peeked in and saw, amazed,
 Gray shapes along the floor,
And wondered why men knelt to pray
 Who never prayed before.

All through the night we knelt and prayed,
 Mad mourners of a corpse!
The troubled black of midnight hung
 Like the curtains of a hearse:
And bitter wine on a cotton swab
 Was the taste of our remorse.

The gray rooster crowed, the red one crowed,
 But the day refused to break:
And crooked shapes of Terror crouched
 In the corners, wide awake:
And every evil thing that walks by night
 Played there for our sake.

They slid on past, they slid on fast,
Like travelers through a mist:
They mocked the moon the way the drunk will,
With a delicate turn and twist,
And with formal step and hideous grace
The phantoms kept their tryst.

Grinning and bowing as they went,
Thin shadows hand in hand:
Around, around, in a ghost parade
They danced to no band:
And the damned grotesques drew arabesques
Like wind across the sand!

With the jerking snap of marionettes
They spun on pointed tread:
But they filled the ear with flutes of Fear
As their grisly dance they led,
And loud they sang, and long they sang,
For they sang to wake the dead.

“Oho!” they cried, “the world is wide,
But shackled men go lame!
And once or twice to throw the dice
Is a gentleman’s game,
But he does not win who plays with Sin
In the secret House of Shame.”

These weren't tricks of the empty air
That frolicked with such glee:
To men who lived their lives in chains,
Whose feet could not go free,
Christ's wounds! they were living things,
Most terrible to see.

Around, around, they waltzed and wound;
Some wheeled in smirking pairs;
With mincing step and painted lip
Some sidled up the stairs:
And with a sneer, and a fawning leer,
Each helped us at our prayers.

The morning wind began to moan,
But still the night dragged on:
Through its giant loom the web of gloom
Crept till each thread was spun:
And as we prayed we grew afraid
Of the Justice of the Sun.

The moaning wind went wandering round
The weeping prison wall:
Till like a wheel of turning steel
We felt the minutes crawl:
O moaning wind! what had we done
To have you guard us all?

At last I saw the shadow-bars,
Like a grid of molded lead,
Slide across the whitewashed wall
That faced my steel-frame bed,
And I knew that somewhere in the world
God's terrible dawn was red.

At six o'clock they racked us in,
At seven all was still,
But the hush and sweep of a mighty wing
Seemed to make the whole block chill,
For the Lord of Death with icy breath
Had entered in to kill.

He did not come with pomp and flags,
He did not need a steed.
Three drugs, a line, a strapped-down board
Are all the chamber's need:
So with a signed warrant the Herald came
To do the secret deed.

We were like men feeling through a swamp
Of filthy dark for a rope:
We did not dare to breathe a prayer
Or give our anguish scope:
Something had died in each of us,
And the dead thing was Hope.

For Man's grim Justice goes its way
And will not step aside:
It kills the weak, it kills the strong,
It has a deadly stride:
With an iron heel it kills the strong,
Its own blood, its own pride!

We waited for the stroke of eight:
Every tongue was thick with thirst:
For the stroke of eight is the stroke of Fate
That leaves a man accursed,
And Fate will use a running line
For the best man and the worst.

There was nothing else for us to do
But wait for the sign to come:
So, like stones in a dried-out valley,
We sat there quiet and dumb:
But every heart in every man
Was beating like a drum!

With a sudden shock the prison clock
Hammered the shivering air,
And from the whole prison rose a wail
Of powerless despair,
Like the sound the frightened marshes hear
From a leper in his lair.

And as you see the most fearful things
 In the crystal of a dream,
We saw the white-sheet gurney wait
 Under the fluorescent beam,
And heard the prayer the pushing drugs
 Smothered into a scream.

And all the grief that moved him so,
 That made him give that cry,
The wild regrets, the bloody sweats—
 No one knew them like I:
For the man who lives more lives than one
 More deaths than one must die.

I V

There is no chapel on the day
The State puts down a man:
The Chaplain's heart is far too sick,
His face too pale and wan,
Or there is something in his eyes
Nobody should look upon.

So they kept us racked till nearly noon,
And then they rang the bell,
And the officers with jingling keys
Unlocked each listening cell,
And down the iron stairs we came,
Each from his private Hell.

Out into God's sweet air we went,
But not the usual way,
For this man's face was white with fear,
And that man's face was gray,
And I never saw sad men who looked
So hungry for the day.

I never saw sad men who looked
 With such a longing eye
Up at that little tent of blue
 We prisoners called the sky,
At every careless cloud that passed
 In its easy freedom by.

But there were some among us there
 Who walked with lowered head,
Who knew that, if the score were fair,
 They should have died instead:
He had only killed a living thing,
 While they had killed the dead.

For the man who sins a second time
 Wakes a dead soul to pain,
Drags it out of its stained shroud
 And makes it bleed again,
Makes it bleed in heavy drops,
 And makes it bleed in vain!

Like apes or clowns, in jumpsuit gray
 With numbers stenciled hard,
Silently we went round and round
 The slippery asphalt yard;
Silently we went round and round,
 And nobody said a word.

Silently we went round and round,
And through each hollow mind
The memory of terrible things
Blew like a terrible wind,
And Horror stalked in front of each man,
And Terror walked behind.

The officers strutted up and down
And herded us like brutes,
Their uniforms were pressed and clean,
They wore their Sunday suits,
But we knew the work they had been at
By the grave-dirt on their boots.

For where a grave had opened wide
There was no grave at all:
Only a stretch of mud and sand
By the hideous prison wall,
And a mound of fresh-turned delta clay
To serve him as a pall.

For he has a pall, this wretched man,
Like few men ever claim:
Deep down beneath a prison yard,
With no rites and no name,
He lies inside a plywood box,
Wrapped in a sheet of shame!

And all the while the heavy clay
 Wears flesh and bone away,
It wears the brittle bone at night
 And the soft flesh by day,
It takes the flesh and bone in turns,
 But it eats the heart always.

For three long years they will not plant
 A root or seedling there:
For three long years that unblessed spot
 Will be sterile and bare,
Staring up at the wondering sky
 With an unreproachful stare.

They think a murderer's heart would spoil
 Every seed they sow.
It isn't true! God's patient earth
 Is kinder than men know,
And the red rose would only bloom more red,
 The white rose whiter grow.

Out of his mouth a red, red rose!
 Out of his heart a white!
For who can say by what strange way
 Christ brings His will to light,
Since the dry staff the pilgrim carried
 Bloomed in the great Pope's sight?

But neither milk-white rose nor red
Can bloom in prison air;
Gravel, pebble, brick and flint
Are what they give us there:
And flowers have been known to heal
An ordinary despair.

So no wine-red rose, and no white rose,
Will petal by petal fall
On that stretch of mud and sand that lies
By the hideous prison wall,
To tell the men who walk the yard
That God's Son died for all.

And yet, though the hideous prison wall
Still rings him round and round,
And a spirit cannot walk by night
When it is shackle-bound,
And a spirit can only weep that lies
In such unholy ground,

He is at peace—this wretched man—
At peace, or will be soon:
There is nothing left to drive him mad,
No Terror walks at noon,
For the lampless earth in which he lies
Has neither Sun nor Moon.

They put him down like a dog is put down:

They did not even toll

A bell, or say a requiem

To rest his startled soul,

But hurried him out on a rolling cart

And hid him in a hole.

They stripped him out of the paper gown

And gave him to the flies:

They mocked the taped and bruised-up arms

And the fixed and staring eyes:

And with laughter they heaped up the shroud

In which their convict lies.

The Chaplain would not kneel to pray

By his dishonored grave:

Would not mark it with the blessed Cross

That Christ for sinners gave,

Because the man was one of those

Christ came down to save.

Yet all is well; he has only crossed

To the border none return:

And strangers' tears will fill for him

Pity's long-broken urn,

For his mourners will be outcast men,

And outcasts always mourn.

V

I don't know whether Laws are right,
Or whether Laws are wrong;
All we know, who lie in jail,
Is that the wall is strong;
And that every day is like a year,
A year whose days are long.

But this I know, that every Law
That men have made for Man,
Since the first man took his brother's life
And the sad world began,
Throws out the wheat and keeps the chaff
With the most evil fan.

And this I know—and wish to God
Everyone knew the same—
That every prison men have built
Is built with bricks of shame,
And barred so Christ can't see inside
How men their brothers maim.

With bars they blur the gracious moon
And blind the good warm sun:
And they do well to hide their Hell,
For inside it things are done
That neither Son of God nor son of man
Should ever look upon!

The vilest deeds, like poison weeds,
Bloom well in prison air:
It is only what is good in a man
That wastes and withers there:
Pale Anguish keeps the heavy gate,
And the Keeper is Despair.

For they starve the small and frightened kid
Till he cries both night and day:
And they cuff the weak, and gas the sick,
And mock the old and gray,
And some go mad, and all go bad,
And no one gets a say.

Each narrow cell in which we live
Is a foul and dark latrine,
And the rotten breath of living Death
Chokes every window screen,
And everything, except for Lust,
Turns to dust in the machine.

The brackish water that we drink
 Crawls with a filthy slime,
And the bitter bread they weigh on scales
 Is full of chalk and lime,
And Sleep won't lie down in this place, but
walks
 Wild-eyed, cursing Time.

But though lean Hunger and green Thirst
 Fight in us like snakes at night,
It isn't prison food that kills—
 What chills and kills outright
Is that every stone you lift by day
 Becomes your heart at night.

With midnight always in your heart
 And twilight in your cell,
We walk the yard or work the fields,
 Each in his private Hell,
And the silence is more terrible
 Than any warning bell.

And never a human voice comes near
 To say one gentle word:
And the eye that watches through the door
 Is pitiless and hard:
And forgotten by everyone, we rot,
 Body and soul both scarred.

And so we rust life's iron chain
 Degraded and alone:
And some men curse, and some men weep,
 And some men make no moan:
But God's eternal Laws are kind
 And break the heart of stone.

And every human heart that breaks,
 In prison cell or yard,
Is like that broken jar that poured
 Its treasure out for the Lord,
And filled the unclean leper's house
 With perfume thick as nard.

Happy the ones whose hearts can break
 And win their pardon in!
How else can a man set straight his plan
 And clean his soul of sin?
How else but through a broken heart
 May Lord Christ enter in?

And he of the taped and bruised-up arms
 And the fixed and staring eyes
Waits for the holy hands that took
 The Thief to Paradise;
And a broken and a contrite heart
 The Lord will not despise.

The man in black who read the Law
Gave him three weeks of life,
Three little weeks in which to heal
His soul of his soul's strife,
And wash from every drop of blood
The hand that held the knife.

And with tears of blood he washed the hand,
The hand that held the steel:
For only blood can wash out blood,
And only tears can heal:
And the crimson stain that was the mark of
Cain
Became Christ's snow-white seal.

V I

In Cummins prison by Grady town
 There is a pit of shame,
And in it lies a wretched man
 Beneath a small steel frame,
In a nameless winding-sheet he lies,
 And his grave has got no name.

And there, till Christ calls forth the dead,
 In silence let him lie:
No need to waste a foolish tear
 Or heave a windy sigh:
The man had killed the thing he loved,
 And so he had to die.

And all men kill the thing they love,
 By all let this be heard,
Some do it with a bitter look,
 Some with a flattering word,
The coward does it with a kiss,
 The brave man with a sword!

DEFINITIONS AND TERMS

Cummins Unit. The Arkansas Division of Correction prison farm outside Grady, in Lincoln County, in operation since 1902. The State's execution chamber is here. Arkansas electrocuted men at Cummins until it adopted lethal injection in 1990.

Varner Unit. The prison adjacent to Cummins where Arkansas houses the men under sentence of death. Men are moved from Varner to Cummins to be killed.

the date. Row idiom for an execution date set by warrant. The whisper of Wilde's yard, that fellow's got to swing, has become the whisper of every American row: that fellow's got a date.

deathwatch. The final period before execution, when the condemned is moved to a cell beside the chamber and observed around the clock... lest he rob the State of its killing.

the line. The intravenous line through which the drugs are pushed. Wilde's running noose becomes the running line.

three drugs. The common American protocol: a sedative, a paralytic, and potassium chloride to stop the heart. Arkansas's sedative is midazolam. It was the approaching expiration of the State's midazolam supply that drove the schedule of April 2017, when Arkansas set eight executions in eleven days and carried out four.

racked in. Prison idiom for locked down in one's cell.

the Hole. Punitive isolation. Wilde's Murderers' Hole required no modernization at all.

walking the line. Field labor under armed supervision... the working life of the Cummins farm for over a century.

C.3.3. Wilde's cell address in Reading Gaol, third cell, third landing, Block C, and the only name printed on the poem's first edition in 1898.

quicklime. Victorian prisons buried the hanged inside the walls in quicklime, believed to hasten the destruction of the body. The modern State buries its dead in ordinary clay, under a number. The forgetting is the same.

the kiss of Caiaphas. Caiaphas was the high priest who presided over the arrest of Jesus. The phrase binds the State's ritual courtesy toward the condemned to the kiss of betrayal in Gethsemane.

nard. The costly ointment poured from the broken alabaster box over the head of Jesus in the house of Simon the leper (Mark 14). Wilde's figure for the broken heart.

the pilgrim's staff. From the Tannhäuser legend: the Pope declares the pilgrim's forgiveness as impossible as his dry staff blooming. Three days later the staff blooms.

the man in black. The sentencing judge. Wilde's man in red wore the scarlet robes of an English criminal-court judge.

FURTHER READING

ON THE ORIGINAL POEM

Wilde, Oscar. *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*. Leonard Smithers, 1898.

The original text, in the public domain, is available through Project Gutenberg and the Internet Archive.

Wilde, Oscar. *De Profundis*. The long letter Wilde wrote from his cell in Reading, published in part in 1905. The prose companion to the Ballad.

Ellmann, Richard. *Oscar Wilde*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1987. The standard biography, including the trials, Reading and the writing of the Ballad.

ON THE DEATH PENALTY IN AMERICA

Prejean, Helen. *Dead Man Walking*. Random House, 1993. The spiritual advisor's account of accompaniment to the chamber... the modern witness tradition this volume stands in.

Stevenson, Bryan. *Just Mercy*. Spiegel and Grau, 2014. The memoir of the capital defense attorney whose work has produced more death row exonerations than any other single advocate in American history.

Death Penalty Information Center. *deathpenaltyinfo.org*. The essential clearinghouse for data on American executions, including the Arkansas schedule of April 2017.

RELATED VOLUMES IN THIS SERIES

Hugo, Victor. *Under Sentence of Death*. 1829. Edited and reset in contemporary Iran by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. V.9 of this series.

Sergeant, Adeline. *A Life Sentence*. 1889. Edited and reset in Florence, Alabama by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. V.15 of this series.

Dunbar, Paul Laurence. *The Sport of the Gods*. 1902. Edited and reset in Pine Bluff and Little Rock, Arkansas by Jeff Hood. Complicit Press, 2026. V.16 of this series. The men of that novel serve their time at Cummins... the same fence line as this poem.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Jeff Hood is an author, activist and death row spiritual advisor. He is the founder of the Execution Intervention Project and serves as Dean of The New Theology School, where he holds the Rev. Charles Moore Professor of Prophetic Theology chair. He has accompanied condemned men across multiple states and has witnessed eleven executions. He lives in North Little Rock, Arkansas.