BOTCHED

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Texas, Reinaldo Dennes and the Horrors that Remain

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COMPLICIT PRESS

BOTCHED: Texas, Reinaldo Dennes and the Horrors that Remain

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PREFACE

Fellow pilgrims,

Reinaldo Dennes was alive when I wrote the first of these pages.

There are seven pieces here. Each carries its date. The earliest comes from November 14, five days before Texas planned to kill him. The last comes from November 26, a week after Texas did. In between are a morning under fluorescent lights, a night in a strange house in Livingston, the chamber in Huntsville, the road home.

I wrote each one without knowing what the next would have to say. On November 14, I expected to stand beside a death. I had stood beside fourteen. I knew nothing yet of the sixty-three minutes. I knew nothing of a leg on fire or a shoulder driving up into my palm.

Texas says it followed all procedures. I was in the chamber. My hand was on his shoulder. The only thing the procedure produced was superadded horror.

Janos Szucs is in these pages too. His family has carried a killing for thirty years. Texas promised them an ending. They gave them a horror show.

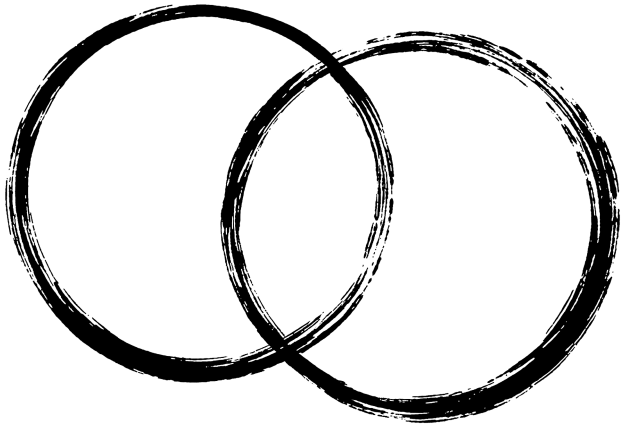
Reinaldo was my friend. He gave me a sentence from his book that opened mine. He spent one of his last mornings

worried about me. “Seriously, how are you going to do this?” he asked.

I still owe him an answer.

As I sign this, Florida has two dates waiting. Ricardo Gonzalez is scheduled for December 1. Willie Crain is scheduled for December 10. When will the nightmare end?

The Rev. Dr. Jeff Hood
Thanksgiving 2026



NOVEMBER 14, 2026

What Love Will Do

On the Urantia Book, the Gospel of John and the Impending Execution of My Friend Reinaldo Dennes

Somewhere between the Urantia Book and the Gospel of John, Reinaldo Dennes and I have become dear friends. Reinaldo is scheduled to be executed in Texas next Thursday, November 19. If the execution proceeds, I will be with him. I can't imagine being anywhere else.

Earlier this year, a friend asked me to check in on Reinaldo. I wrote to him and assured him that his search was his alone. Though I am a priest, I wanted nothing more than to meet him where he was. Men on death row know what priests carry through the door. They have heard enough people arrive with answers, enough people arrive with a God they think they have already figured out. I told Reinaldo I had nothing to teach him. I wanted to walk with him.

We started to walk. In time, I opened the Urantia Book (UB), a sprawling twentieth-century spiritual and philosophical cosmology that blends Christian theology, speculative understandings of the universe and an expansive account of humanity's relationship with God. I approached it the way you enter another man's house when you have been invited in. You do not rearrange the furniture. You try to understand what the person who lives there holds dear.

At UB 188:5.2, Reinaldo pointed me to a sentence that has stayed with me:

> "Divine love does not merely forgive wrongs; it absorbs and actually destroys them."

The words have followed me back into the Gospel of John, into passages I have read hundreds of times. I find myself seeing things differently. A sentence written in this book that Reinaldo gave me has opened wider a book I thought I already knew quite well.

That is one of the gifts of friendship. Another person gives you a new way of seeing something you have spent your whole life looking at.

I've been collecting my thoughts on love and wrongs as I prepare to travel to be with Reinaldo next week.

The question for me is what does it mean for love to absorb a wrong. Forgiveness stops short of that. So does excuse. So does pretending it never happened. Absorb it and destroy it.

Forgiveness is difficult enough. We know how to apologize. We know how to grant pardons. We know how to tell people that they must find a way to move forward. But none of those things makes the wrong disappear. The person who was hurt still has to live with what happened. The person who did the hurting still has to live with what they did. Families inherit things they never chose. Institutions develop habits around injuries they helped create.

The wrong remains in the world.

I keep returning to the beginning of John. A man is standing beside a river, watching Jesus approach. John the Baptist calls

him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Reinaldo's sentence has made those familiar words feel different to me. Takes away. Absorbs. Both reach toward the same extraordinary possibility…that love might take the weight of what has happened rather than find another person to carry it.

We have become accustomed to a different arrangement. When somebody is hurt, we look for somebody who can be made to hurt in return. When somebody is humiliated, we look for somebody who can be brought low. When somebody kills, we begin to speak about another death as though we have found the right answer. We have built institutions around this exchange. We have given it legal language and moral language. We have absurdly called it justice.

John knows this arrangement. There is a moment when the high priest Caiaphas explains that it is better for one man to die for the people than for the whole nation to perish. He says it as though he has solved a difficult problem. The death of one person becomes the price of everybody else's security. It is an old calculation. The state has never stopped making it.

Then there is the Jesus who refuses to participate in that calculation. A woman is dragged into the temple courtyard and placed in front of him. The men surrounding her have their law and their stones. They want an answer that will allow them to proceed. Jesus bends down to write in the dust. We never learn what he writes. We know that the stones remain on the ground. The woman is still there. Whatever she has done is still true. But the men who came looking for another body to punish leave without one.

I wonder whether this is what Reinaldo's sentence is trying to tell me. Love does not pretend the wrong never happened. It does not erase the woman, the injury or the truth. It interrupts the machinery that would make another injury out of the first. It destroys the machine.

That interruption runs through the rest of John's Gospel. On the night before his death, Jesus kneels in front of the men who have followed him. He washes their feet. Judas is there. Jesus knows what Judas has done and what he is about to do. Still, he kneels.

Later, when Peter reaches for his sword in the garden and cuts off the ear of the high priest's servant, Jesus tells him to put it away. The violence has arrived at the door. It has a name, a face, a body to injure. Jesus refuses to let it continue through him.

I do not think this makes the suffering any less real. Love does not make the murdered less dead. It does not return the years stolen from somebody or repair a childhood broken by abuse. It cannot ask the wounded to forget. It has no business sending them back to the people who harmed them. There is no holiness in pretending an injury has disappeared. A love that demanded silence from the wounded would be another instrument of the injury.

But a wrong can be remembered without being obeyed. It can remain part of the world's history without becoming the world's instruction for what must happen next.

That is what I see in the locked room after the crucifixion. The disciples have shut themselves away. Jesus comes among them. He has not come back untouched. The holes are still in his

hands. His side is still open. Thomas will be invited to put his fingers there. John does not give us an Easter in which the wounds have been tidied away. The risen Christ carries the evidence of what happened to him. Still, the first thing he offers the people who abandoned him is peace.

The wound is in the room. It gives no orders.

I have spent years in rooms where the state insists that death can answer death. I have watched men approach the last minutes of their lives while other people stand around with the confidence that everything has been arranged. The machinery is ready. The paperwork is complete. The decisions have been made. There is a terrible certainty in those rooms, a certainty that the past has come due.

But I have never watched a wrong disappear in an execution chamber. I have watched another death occur. I have watched another set of people begin the difficult work of living with it. Whatever the state believes it has settled, the suffering does not end when the witnesses are escorted out.

Sometimes I think about how much room there must be for God to work in the minds of two people who have arrived at the same questions by such different roads. Reinaldo speaks about a voyage. I find myself returning to Jesus' promise that his Father's house has many rooms. We talk. We listen. Neither of us seems interested in building a fence around the other. I have learned things about the possibilities of God from sitting with this man.

I have also begun thinking differently about something Jesus says in John: that he has other sheep who do not belong to this fold. Preachers are quick to assume they know which fold they

belong to. We have a tendency to draw the boundaries first and ask God to bless them afterward.

Reinaldo has once again reminded me that the love of God is wide and is destroying all that would keep us from love…keep us from each other.

On the night before his execution, Jesus tells his disciples that he no longer calls them servants. He calls them friends. I keep thinking about that distinction. Friendship can hold two people who never arrive at the same answer. It asks something more difficult than agreement. It asks us to remain with one another. Jesus says there is no greater love than laying down one's life for one's friends. John places those words in the mouth of a man who knows what the state is about to do to him.

My friend Reinaldo is at that table this week.

At the end of John, Peter finds Jesus beside another charcoal fire. The last time Peter stood beside charcoal, he was denying that he knew Jesus. Three times he said it. Now Jesus has prepared breakfast. There is fish and bread. He asks Peter three times whether he loves him.

I am moved by the way John tells this story. Jesus does not pretend the denial never happened. Peter is not given a different past. But the morning is not organized around his failure. There is food. There is conversation. There is work to do. The friendship has survived the worst thing Peter knows about himself.

This is what it means for love to destroy a wrong. The past stays. It loses the power to determine everything that follows. The wounded remember. No second wound is charged as the

price of remembering. What happened is not denied. It is kept from becoming the only thing that can happen.

I return to the Urantia Book. I return to Reinaldo's passage. Divine love absorbs and destroys. To absorb a wrong is to take from evil the one thing it seems most determined to possess…the right to decide what goodness becomes.

In John, Jesus says he has overcome the world. He says it before the soldiers arrive. I have spent a good deal of my life watching the state try to overcome the world by killing people. I have been in fourteen different executions. I have heard the machinery and watched the bodies. The state has called each death an answer. The wrong walked out of the chamber every time.

If Texas goes forward with the evil it is planning for next Thursday, I will be in the chamber with Reinaldo. I will be there as a priest…as his friend. In addition to the Gospel of John, the Urantia Book will be with me. It seems to me that friends carry each other's books from time to time.

Love transcends all of our books.



NOVEMBER 18, 2026

"How are you going to do this?"

Contemplating Three Executions with Reinaldo Dennes

This morning, Reinaldo Dennes looked at me under the fluorescent lights. Tomorrow, Texas plans to kill him. He could tell I was tired. That light hides nothing. The exhaustion was laid bare.

"It seems to me that I'm not the only one about to be executed," he said.

Reinaldo is wise. He knew I had nothing to say.

Then he demanded, "Seriously, how are you going to do this?" He has one morning left after this one. He spent part of this one worried about me.

Of course, he meant the executions. His own. Ricardo Gonzalez on December 1. Willie Crain on December 10. Three men. Three dates. Texas will take the first. Florida is waiting for the other two.

I told him, "You just do it."

I don't know if I believe that. I doubt he believed it either. The words hung between us with nowhere to land. The cinder block walls weighed on me the whole time. They seemed to lean in over the two of us. I kept waiting for them to fall and crush us both.

Some questions have no answers. Some things no human being should ever have to learn. The day comes anyway. The phone rings. The prison gives its instructions. Somebody tells

you what time to arrive. You put clothes in a bag. You check to make sure you have your ID. You pull on your eyelids. You get in the car. An ordinary morning carries you into a killing.

I want to crawl out of my own skin and leave it in this chair. My body knows before my mind does what is coming. My stomach knows the dates better than my calendar. I eat anyway. Chewing. Swallowing. The ridiculous chore of staying alive while three men are marched toward their demise.

My bones drag the pavement. My jaw aches from torturous words. Sleep has become a room I am afraid to enter. When I close my eyes, the dates are like headlights. I am tired in places sleep cannot reach.

My spirit knows before anything does. It doesn't have to read court orders to know what is coming. It knows the smell of a place where something terrible is about to happen. I am walking toward a fire that I can already feel burning.

Then there are the rooms. The cold waiting rooms. The vending machines humming against the silence. The hard chairs built to comfort no one. The doors that lock behind you with a sound you learn to hear in your sleep. I can taste the air before I get there. My body is already standing in rooms my feet have yet to enter.

A prison is a refrigerator. Cold metal under cold light. Everything human is supposed to keep in there until the state is ready to destroy.

I have begun to call this my month in Gethsemane. I connect with the horror. Sweat pooling on skin. Dirt ground into the knees. A man begging the next thing not to happen. Everybody else asleep.

The garden will not stay put. It follows me into the grocery store. It climbs into bed beside me. It sits down at the table in the morning. I carry olive trees through the checkout line. I feel the blood pour out on the pavement of the parking lot.

Out there, the world is hanging lights. Somebody is planning Thanksgiving. Somebody is wrapping a present. I don't begrudge them any of it. I only know that the calendar holding their holidays holds three deaths for me. The same little squares. The same black numbers.

A calendar is the first instrument of execution. It kills a man slowly for weeks before anybody touches him. As excitement for the holidays builds, I want to put my hands around November to keep it from becoming December. The days pile up on my chest. The world is counting shopping days. I am counting the other kind.

Other families are counting too. They buried their dead long ago. I carry them into the garden with me. The victims whisper in my ear, "Why are you helping these monsters?"

Reinaldo's question has not left me since he asked it. Part of it was about me. How do you walk into another execution chamber? How do you watch a man you have come to love become the subject of a state procedure? How do you hear the final words? How do you watch the breathing change and stop? How do you leave afterward?

I have been in fourteen executions. I know the bright lights, the arranged equipment and the officials moving with practiced efficiency. I know how fast a human being can disappear behind procedure. I have never grown used to the gurgling sounds of a human being dying. I don't want to.

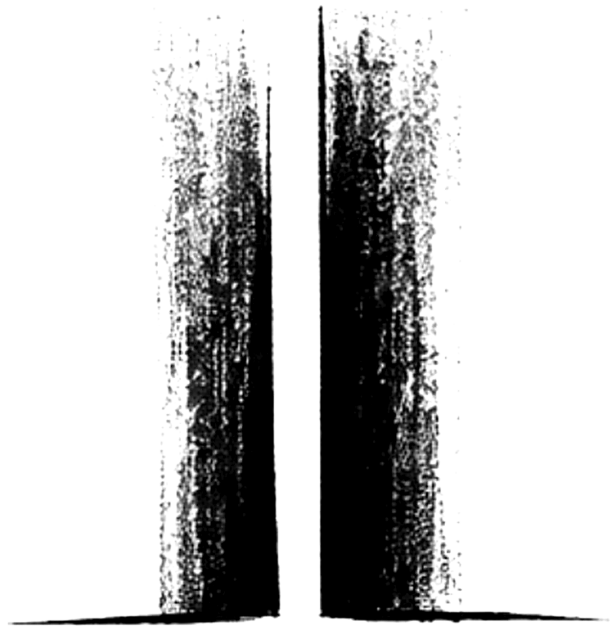
Would the road be easier if I cared less? I can't. Reinaldo is Reinaldo. Ricardo is Ricardo. Willie is Willie. Each has his own voice, his own history and his own way of filling a conversation. Each has handed me something I cannot set down.

Three last conversations are pressing against the back of my throat. The final words of humans dehumanized. I think about the lonely drive home. The words echoing in my ears. The highway lights my only comfort. The pain of survival. The nightmares.

I have found no great capacity to endure. These mornings I get out of bed feeling like I am about to be an accessory to murder. Maybe I am? How do you avoid it? Is there any soul left when one engages in such horror? Stay awake! The weight is still yours to carry.

Reinaldo looked at me and replied, "There is nobody else who would do this. This is the great calling of your life. Can't you hear it?"

Sometimes, I wish I didn't.



NOVEMBER 19, 2026

Push Back Against the Night

Thoughts Before the Execution of Reinaldo Dennes

Push Back Against the Night

Closing your eyes and seeing the chamber.
Opening your eyes and seeing the chamber.
No side of the eyelid is the safer side.
No hour on the clock will make it stranger.

You know this room. It knows its way to you.
It followed you home. It answers to your name.
It does not sleep. It has its work to do.
By morning it will want you back again.

Push back the night. Put both hands on the dark.
Lean as you would against a closing door.
It gives an inch. It takes the inch right back.
The state can wait. The state has waited before.

Closing your eyes. Opening your eyes.
Push back the night. Somebody is still alive.

There is a loneliness that belongs to the night before an execution. It comes from knowing what tomorrow contains with no power to stop it. A man I love is breathing. The state is

preparing to end that breath. Between those two facts lies a night that refuses to move.

I am in Livingston, Texas, sleeping in a strange house. The house has its own sounds. Pipes shift. Floorboards complain. Something moves outside. A door settles against its frame. I listen harder than I should.

Death has a sound before it happens.

Tonight it is the rumble of a distant truck, a telephone vibrating, the click of a house settling in the dark. The mind makes arrangements with every noise. It turns the ordinary into an announcement. I know the house is only a house. Knowledge cannot quiet the body.

The body feels what is coming.

I have been in execution chambers fourteen times. I have stood beside fourteen men as the state carried out its final violence against them. I have learned the architecture of those rooms, the choreography of people who have convinced themselves that killing a human being can be made orderly. I can tell you what a room sounds like when it becomes a place of death.

The night before never becomes familiar.

Experience builds no protection. The room travels. It enters unfamiliar houses, sits at the edge of the bed, waits in the dark whether I am reaching for sleep or giving up on it.

I wrote the above sonnet out of that discovery: shut or open, my eyes show me the same room.

Midnight does not make tomorrow more understandable. Three in the morning does not make it less real. The clock moves with an indifference that feels obscene. People are sleeping.

Somebody is watching television. A child is being tucked into bed. The world behaves as though tomorrow is an ordinary day.

For one man, it isn't. The people who love him will not see an ordinary day either. Neither will those of us who promised to accompany him.

So much cannot be done. No door I open leads to a different ending. A telephone call will not make the machinery disappear. Prayer does not work as a transaction with God. There is no bargaining my way out of tomorrow.

I can refuse to surrender tonight.

Darkness does not yield to determination. What I have is smaller, harder. I stay present. I keep tomorrow from eating the minutes left in today. The man awaiting execution has thoughts, preferences, memories, irritations, humor and things he wants to say. He has not become a body in a chamber or a name attached to a date in a government record.

He is here.

Because he is here, there are conversations to have. Words deserve to be heard. Love must not be postponed until the state has finished its work. I have learned to remain available to the living person in front of me.

The state has its schedule, its procedures, its clocks, its keys, its rehearsed explanations. Its appointment will keep while I attend to a man who still draws breath.

I return to the sounds of this house. The floorboards. Something outside. I shut my eyes to the chamber. I open them to Livingston, to the middle of another terrible night.

I wish I could say fourteen executions have taught me to sleep through these nights or made the fifteenth easier to

approach. The body refuses to learn certain things because learning them would mean accepting what no human being should have to accept.

So I push back against the night. How tomorrow ends is beyond my knowing or my control. Past the walls of this strange house, a human being is waiting for morning. He deserves to know he has not been abandoned.



NOVEMBER 20, 2026

Botched Execution in Texas

Reinaldo Dennes

Texas killed Reinaldo Dennes tonight. It took sixty-three minutes.

They strapped him down a few minutes after six. Then, the hunt for a vein began. It took more than one attempt. The minutes piled up while an old man lay tied to a table waiting for strangers to find a way into his body. I was stuck right outside the chamber. I knew that things were not going smoothly.

When I got there, one line was in his neck. The other was in his foot.

I stood at the top of the gurney with my hand on his shoulder. I never took it off. From where I stood, I could see his eyes. I could see him looking for something. I wanted him to find me there. I wanted him to know that whatever happened next, he would not have to face it without someone who loved him beside him.

He asked me to speak. I told him how much I love him. I thanked him for his friendship. I wanted those to be the last things he heard from me. He told me he wished he could take me with him. Imagine that. A man standing at the edge of his own death thinking about the person he would leave behind. I didn't know what to say to that. I still don't.

He gave his last statement. He wanted the people he loves to know he had been blessed these thirty years "knowing the love of the father." Then he called out, "Go, warden!"

The poison started to flow.

I have stood beside thirteen lethal injections. A man is supposed to lose consciousness fast. The eyes close. The body goes quiet. That is what I had seen before. That is what I expected to see again. You learn to recognize the sequence. You learn to watch for the moment when a man's body begins to leave him.

Reinaldo's body did not go quiet. For four to five minutes, it fought.

"The pain!" he shouted. "Go! Go!"

"Shit."

The scream came up from right below me. "My leg, my leg, my leg." His leg was "on fire." "My right leg is killing me!" He shifted on the gurney, back and forth, back and forth. He contorted. He grabbed hold of the leather straps and pulled against them until his body lifted.

His shoulder drove up into my palm. Then it fell away. Then it drove up again.

I held on. That was all I had to give him. One hand on one shoulder.

When he rose against the straps, my hand rose. When he dropped, my hand dropped. When he threw himself to one side, my hand went with him. I was not holding him still. Nobody could have held him still. Every jolt of that body came up through my arm.

Imagine having your hand on someone screaming for their life. Imagine knowing that the person beneath your hand is somebody you love. Imagine hearing someone you are touching beg for the pain to stop. Imagine having nothing to give him except the hand itself. There is a particular kind of helplessness in that. You want to reach inside the world and tear apart whatever is causing the suffering. You want to undo the last few minutes. You want to get him off that table. But the table holds him. The straps hold him. The poison keeps flowing.

I could see his eyes the whole way through. I had just told this man I love him. Now I stood over him, watching him suffer, with nothing but a hand. I wanted to do something worthy of the love I had just told him I felt. I couldn't.

A hand is a small thing in that room. It cannot slow what is running through a man's veins. It cannot pull a needle out of a neck. It cannot stop the machinery of the state. It can stay. I did everything I could to make it stay.

Twice he screamed, "It's not working like it's supposed to."

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. What is going on? Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"I don't think this is normal," he said. "Take me, Father. Don't let me suffer like this. C'mon."

There was surprise all around that room. Everybody walks in expecting smooth. Everybody walks in expecting quick. I will say nothing more about the others who were in there. I want to be let back in the next time a man asks for me. I cannot let what happened tonight become a reason to leave another man to face his death alone.

It went on. Four to five minutes. Try counting those minutes while somebody you love is screaming beneath your hand. Try

listening to a man beg not to suffer when you know you cannot make it stop. My hand kept moving because he kept moving. I could not make the pain go away. I could not make the minutes go faster. I could not keep the state from killing him. I could only stay.

All through it, he prayed.

"Take this pain."

"Let me go, Father."

"I'm here. I've been your son all these years."

"I'm coming to you, Father."

He fought until the end. Every curse ended in prayer. Every scream turned back toward the Father he had been talking to for thirty years. I kept listening. I kept looking at him. I wanted him to hear something in my presence that the poison could not take away. That he was loved. That he mattered. That he was not alone.

Then one prayer swallowed the others.

"Take me home, Father."

He said it while his body twisted. He said it while his breathing turned to labor. The words came slower…then slower still.

"Take me home, Father."

Those were the last words he could get out.

Three loud groans followed. I heard them from above his head. Then came the snoring. The reporters counted eight snores, each one quieter until a last loud one broke the pattern. After that, about a dozen breaths. Each was smaller than the one before it.

I kept my hand on his shoulder.

I wanted to believe he could still feel it there. I wanted to believe that somewhere beneath all that pain, he knew I had not moved. Then the shoulder under my hand went still.

At 7:07, it was over. A physician examined him. At 7:08, Reinaldo Dennes was pronounced dead.

I walked out of the prison and went live. I said what I had seen. I am saying it again now because I cannot bear the thought of what happened to him being reduced to a sentence in an official statement. I cannot bear the thought of people being told that everything went according to procedure and then moving on with their lives. I cannot move on from what I heard tonight. I cannot pretend I didn't see it.

Somewhere in the middle of trying to tell everybody what happened, I realized I was still holding back tears I hadn't been allowed to cry. There was too much to explain. Too much to say. Too many people who needed to know what had happened to my friend. I kept talking because somebody needed to say what happened in that room. But the tears were still there. They are still there.

This was my fifteenth execution. I have watched lethal injections in Missouri, Florida, Alabama, Oklahoma and Texas. Nothing I have seen comes close to this one.

The whole country gets told to look to Texas. Texas knows how to do this. Texas does it right. So look. Look at a seventy-year-old man screaming about his leg with needles in his neck and his foot. Look at his body pulling against leather restraints. Listen to him say it isn't working. Listen to him beg not to suffer. Listen to him ask to be taken home.

Tonight, the prison says it followed all procedures.

I was proud of Reinaldo. I was proud of the way he kept reaching for the Father he loved. I was proud of his faith even as I wished with everything in me that he did not have to demonstrate it under those circumstances. He was my friend. He was a man I loved. He deserved better than this. He deserved better than a table, leather straps and needles in his body. He deserved better than to spend his final minutes screaming in pain while the state watched him die.

I keep thinking about his shoulder beneath my hand. I keep thinking about how it rose and fell, how I followed every movement, how much I wanted to do something more. I keep thinking about his eyes. I keep thinking about a man who knew he was leaving this world and still wished he could take me with him.

I wish I could have done more for him. I wish I could have taken some of that pain. I wish he hadn't had to beg for the pain to stop. I wish the last thing he had experienced in this world had been gentler.

I couldn't go with him. I couldn't take away his pain. I couldn't stop what was happening. All I could do was stay.



NOVEMBER 21, 2026

I Was in Prison...and You Came to Me

> *"for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me."*
>
> MATTHEW 25:35-36 (NRSV)

I was in prison... : The Room I Have Not Left

There are places you cannot leave when you walk out the door.

For days, I sat with a man who knew the state intended to kill him. I watched the hours disappear. I heard words I will carry for the rest of my life.

On Thursday night, I stood at the top of a gurney in Huntsville. My hand was on Reinaldo Dennes's shoulder, where it stayed the whole time I was in the chamber. I could see his eyes. He asked me to speak. I told him how much I love him. I thanked him for his friendship.

Then the poison started to flow. He cursed. He moved on that gurney for four minutes, maybe five. I heard a man scream for his death. My hand stayed.

Afterward, I stood outside the prison trying to tell people what I had seen. I told it again on Friday. The words came out of my mouth while the rest of me was still at the top of the gurney.

Then I came home.

The lights are on. The refrigerator hums. My children are asleep. The world kept moving while a man was killed, the way a river keeps moving past a drowning. Ordinary life is waiting for me as though nothing happened on Thursday, as though I could pick it up where I set it down.

The piece of art Reinaldo gave me is in my house. God becomes man in that piece so that man might become God. I look at it now with the chamber still in my eyes.

Something in me still stands in that room. I am more tired than I know how to say. I am desperate for sleep. Sleep will not come. There are tears I have not been allowed to cry. When I close my eyes, I am not sure I have left.

When Did We See You? : I was in prison...

Jesus describes a throne with every nation gathered in front of it. The shepherd walks among them, parting sheep from goats. Nobody is asked how many prayers they memorized. Nobody is asked to defend a doctrine. Fundamentalists have built kingdoms on those questions. The King asks about bodies.

He asks about bread in an empty hand. He asks about a door opened to a stranger in the dark. He asks about the long walk through steel doors to sit with the condemned.

I was hungry and you fed me. I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me. I was sick and you cared for me. I was in prison and you came to me.

Neither group recognizes him. The sheep are surprised to learn they ever met him, the goats just as surprised to learn they

passed him by. Both ask the same question. When did we see you?

The goats are no monsters. They kept their prayers. They kept their hands clean. They drove past the prison with the windows up because they were waiting for a King who looked like a King.

We want Jesus to announce himself. We want some sign that the person in front of us is worth the trouble. We want to know what the prisoner did before we decide what the prisoner is owed. Jesus gives no such test. He says he is there. He comes without a crown, with a number where his name should be.

I went to Huntsville because my friend was going to die. Reinaldo and I came from different places. We became dear friends anyway. I was not looking for Jesus in that chamber. The Gospel says he was there before I arrived.

I have sat with men the world has finished describing. I have listened to their fears. I have prayed with them, held their hands. I have shared Communion with them. I have watched the state get ready to take their lives while people outside the walls ate supper, never knowing what was being done in their name.

The Gospel leaves the dead in the story. The victims are there. Their families are there with a grief no execution has ever ended. So is the man on the gurney...wearing the face of the King.

Staying in Prison

No prayer turns an execution chamber into something else. I have looked for one. I found the end of my own strength in

Huntsville. I could not stop the machinery. I could not take the suffering out of his body. I could keep my hand on his shoulder. Presence was all that remained, small as a candle in a slaughterhouse.

The King knows that room from the inside. A state stretched out his arms too. A crowd watched him die. The ones who loved him could fix nothing, though a few of them stayed at the foot of the cross until it was finished.

Jesus never promises to be found where we can fix things. He is found where somebody refuses to leave. The sheep in the story cure nobody. They open no cell. They sit down beside the sick man. They walk into the prison. They stay.

Now I have to learn to stay here too. With my children. With the people who love me. In a house where nobody is dying. Coming home feels like leaving him behind. Love asks it of me anyway. I do not know yet how to do it.

Most of us will never stand in a chamber. All of us know someone the world would rather forget. We cannot always rescue each other. We cannot reverse what has been done. We cannot find the words that make suffering make sense. We can refuse to disappear. We can sit beside someone. We can open a door, set another plate at the table.

The King keeps appearing in places we avoid. He is in the prison. He is in the hospital. He is in the stranger whose story frightens us. He is on a gurney in Huntsville while the state gets ready to kill him.

I was in prison…and you came to me.

I came.

My hand was…is…on his shoulder.

I do not know how to take it off.
I don't want to.



NOVEMBER 21, 2026

Coming Home After the Botched Execution of Reinaldo Dennes

After what happened to Reinaldo Dennes…after standing beside him while he screamed for death, begging for the pain to stop…after walking out of that prison and trying to find words for something I still cannot comprehend…there has been no real coming home.

The phone keeps ringing. Messages keep arriving. Interviews. Questions. Requests to explain what happened. The story has traveled farther today than I could have imagined. People want to know what I saw. They want to know what it sounded like. They want to know whether it was as bad as I said.

It was.

And now I am home. But there is something unbearable about walking through the door and returning to the life that is waiting for me. I feel guilty about the warmth of it. Guilty that I get to be here. Guilty that I can sit with my family while Reinaldo cannot sit with his.

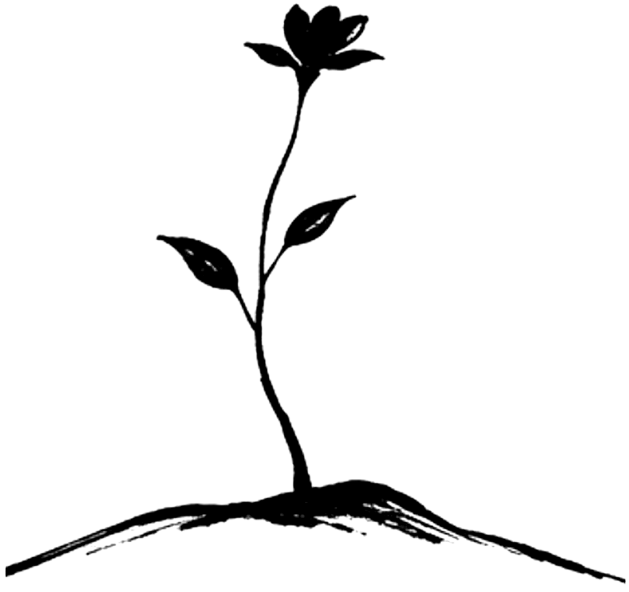
I know that isn't fair to them. I know it isn't fair to me. But grief does not always make room for what is fair.

I am worn in a way that sleep should be able to fix. My body is begging for a bed. My eyes are burning. All I want is to close them and disappear for a few hours. But every time I get close, I am back in that room. I hear his voice. I feel his shoulder moving beneath my hand. I hear him asking to be taken home.

Reinaldo is home now, whatever home means beyond this life.

But there are things you carry out of an execution chamber that nobody can see. They come with you into the car. They sit with you while you answer the phone. They follow you into the house and lie down beside you when you try to sleep.

Home is far closer to the chamber than one might think.



NOVEMBER 26, 2026

A Week after Reinaldo Dennes

Texas killed Reinaldo Dennes a week ago.

The news has moved on. The prison has gone back to its gray routine. The paperwork sits in a drawer. Somewhere, somebody has emptied a trash can, mopped a floor and turned off a light. The machinery has settled back into its ordinary silence.

Texas has washed its hands.

Mine are still full.

I walked out of the prison that night and spoke into a camera. My mouth worked without me. The words came out because they had to go somewhere.

The next morning, I faced reporters to say the execution was botched. I told them what I had seen. I tried to put language around something that had resisted every language I knew. Then the questions stopped and silence came down like a lid.

I have lived under that lid for a week.

My body has not heard the news. It has not received the official notification that Reinaldo is dead and the matter is closed. Sleep comes, takes nothing with it and leaves before morning. I wake with sand in my joints.

The tiredness is a wet coat with no buttons. It hangs from my shoulders. I drag it from room to room. Even sitting still requires something I cannot find.

My arm remembers. Huntsville is written into the muscle in a script I cannot read. There are places in my body that are still waiting for something to happen.

My ears have kept their own record. Quiet rooms have teeth now. A door closing somewhere in the house can reach across the distance and find me. A sudden noise makes the whole world tighten.

I will be in the middle of something small. Washing a dish. Looking for a shirt. Listening to somebody tell me about their day. Then the floor of my house turns to water. I go under. I come up in Huntsville.

The prison is there again, its walls holding the terrible weight of that night. Then I am back where I was, standing in my kitchen or sitting at the table, my heart pounding like a fist on a door. Nobody saw me leave. Nobody knows I have been gone.

The people who carried out the killing went home that night. They took off their clothes. They ate something. They might have watched television. They hung the work on a hook by the door and went to bed.

The chamber sits empty, waiting for the next man. Its surfaces can be cleaned. Its instruments can be inspected. Its lights can be switched off and on again.

Those of us who loved Reinaldo walked out with the building on our backs.

Grief is too small a word. No heart gave out. No car crossed a center line. No terrible accident interrupted an ordinary afternoon.

Men spent years arriving at a date, circled an hour on a calendar and drew a paycheck for it. There were meetings. There

were preparations. There were people whose job it was to make sure that a human being would not leave the prison alive.

I am mourning something done on purpose. I am mourning a death that had an address, a schedule and an administrative paper trail.

Then Texas wrote its account.

It is bleached. A man's dying comes out pressed flat between two timestamps. The blood disappears. The body disappears. The minutes become manageable. The language is scrubbed until nobody has to smell anything.

Texas lied about what happened to Reinaldo. The state has the luxury of issuing a statement and moving on. I have the memory. Reinaldo cannot stand beside me and tell them what they got wrong.

So I keep talking.

Every telling is a hand back on the stove. Every interview requires me to reach again toward the fire. I open the door to that night and invite strangers inside. I describe what I saw. I find the words. I watch the words leave my mouth and become somebody else's information.

There are things I would pay to forget. There are things I cannot allow myself to forget. The dead cannot correct the record.

Being a witness sounds noble from a distance. Up close, it is a tired man carrying the worst night of his year to strangers, hoping that somewhere in the telling a little piece of the truth might survive.

The family of Janos Szucs has carried a killing for thirty years. Their wound is older than mine. Their loss has its own calendar,

its own anniversaries and its own rooms that will never be the same.

Texas promised them that night would close it. I will not pretend that their grief is mine or that I can measure the distance they have traveled. Their dead have names. Their pain has not gone anywhere.

But wounds do not close on a schedule. A state can announce an ending. It cannot command the heart to arrive there.

The sun came up the next morning without a mark on it. That has been one of the harder things to accept. The sky did not darken. The birds did not fall from the trees. Traffic moved through intersections. Somewhere, a school bell rang.

People bought coffee, complained about the weather and went about the business of being alive. The world did not pause long enough to acknowledge that Reinaldo had disappeared from it.

I have found that hard to forgive.

My house kept going too. Plates land on the table. Water runs through the pipes. Voices cross the room. The people I love are alive. They need my whole face. They deserve my whole face.

I give them what I can find of it. I answer questions. I try to listen. I try to inhabit the small mercies of an ordinary evening. But some part of me is still standing in that prison. The rest of me is doing its best to make dinner.

Some mornings, I can pray. Other mornings, I stand there with my mouth shut.

I have spent much of my life trying to find words for the presence of God in places where the world has abandoned

people. I believe in a God who remains. A God who does not look away. A God whose love is not measured by the number of terrible things prevented.

But belief does not make the room less empty. Theology does not give me back the sound of Reinaldo's voice. Sometimes all I can offer God is the fact that I have not walked away.

He wanted to go home. He trusted somebody to carry him. He went. The door closed behind him with me on the wrong side.

I believe he is held. I believe that love has a reach beyond the walls we build and the lives we take. Believing it has not taken one pound off this week. God got Reinaldo. I got the seven days.

Nothing in them has been beautiful. Love has not softened a single hour. Faith has not rubbed out one image. Prayer has not made my arm forget.

A collar carries nothing. It cannot lift a body from a memory or absolve a state of what it has done. There is no special protection in being a priest. No sacramental exemption from the ordinary wreckage of loving someone the state killed.

This is the fifteenth time I have come home from an execution. I know the road by now. I know the strange distance between the prison and the rest of the world. I know what it is to return to a house where the lights are on and discover that some part of you never made it through the door.

I know the weeks that follow. I know that people will stop asking. I know that the world has a remarkable appetite for forgetting what it has already consumed.

Knowing the road has not shortened it.

The state can kill a man in minutes. The killing goes on for years in everyone who stood close. It settles into muscles, into sleep, into the spaces between ordinary sentences. It follows people to the grocery store and sits with them at dinner. It waits in the quiet. It takes up residence in the body without asking permission.

Sometimes accompanying a man means being left with what he could not take with him.

I have an arm that remembers. I have a house full of people I love and a prison I cannot leave. I have the words Texas used and the memory of what was done. I have a dead friend.

I have no lesson to hang beside any of it. No tidy theology. No beautiful conclusion. No assurance that the next morning will be easier than the last.