



The Last Face You'll  
Ever See

**Ivan Solotaroff**

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THE  
LAST FACE  
YOU'LL  
EVER  
SEE

THE CULTURE OF DEATH ROW

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IVAN SOLOTAROFF

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PRAISE FOR THE LAST FACE YOU’LL EVER SEE

Also by Ivan Solotaroff

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# PROLOGUE

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FEBRUARY 24, 1995. COLONEL DONALD HOCUTT, executioner for the State of Mississippi, pulls his Ford truck up to the Parchman State Penitentiary exit checkpoint off Highway 49W, halfway between Jackson, Mississippi, and Memphis, Tennessee. A guard stepping out of the checkpoint booth for a mandatory truck search sees Hocutt at the wheel and says “Sir” reverently, but he barely acknowledged. Hocutt has been looking for words to describe to me the weird “crackling” that comes into his head every time he’s in this prison farm now. When he concentrates, particularly on something that relates to his job, it’s as though the world doesn’t exist. “I could say it’s like a noise,” he tries. “Like a radio stuck in between stations. But it’s really more of a feeling, like I was living under power lines or something. It’s not pleasant.”

This is one of the last times Hocutt will pass the checkpoint, after twenty years of corrections work. We drove up this morning for him to get some paperwork for his medical discharge stamped in the administration office, then he gave me a tour of Parchman’s 19,000 acres, from the gas chamber to the warden’s house. His paperwork, old-fashioned-looking forms of various sizes, has been in his lap the entire tour. He keeps touching it like a high school senior with his last yearbook, squaring corners, adjusting paper clips, and smoothing carbons with an awkwardness that’s very unlike him.

“It must be hard to be leaving after all this time,” I say. “That’s a whole world in there.”

The guard has given the inside and back of the truck a once-over, and we’re cleared to go. Hocutt opens the leatherette console between us and wedges his paperwork in between an old cassette of *Exile on Main Street* and a huge nickel-plate Colt .45. Then he turns south out of the exit on to 49W and floors it, staring ahead with one arm stiff at the wheel as the truck picks up speed down the flat, two-lane Delta highway. I can’t take my eyes off the Colt.

“Donald,” I say, touching the barrel. “That’s a big gun.”

“That’s a dangerous gun,” he says softly. “Maybe you don’t want to be touching it.” It turns out he keeps it loaded, with an eight-shot clip of Plus-P “cop-killer” hollow-point bullets. It’s also cocked at all times, like his eight other pistols and rifles, with only the safety on. “I’ll be damned if I’m going to die trying to get my gun loaded. Watch me close now.” He takes the wheel in both hands.

I’m not sure what I’m supposed to be watching. Hocutt is a huge man, easily 300 pounds with thick, baby-face features that cloud over dramatically when he concentrates or falls into one of his moods. I hear a rustle of paper in the glove compartment, then see he’s gotten his right hand off the wheel and down into the console for the Colt without my noticing. He eases the gun out and across his lap, releasing the safety with his thumb as he raises the barrel under his left elbow and aims out the driver’s window. “Pow,” he says softly, releasing his breath.

“I do that a lot when I drive,” he explains, sliding the safety back on as he returns the gun to the console. “You’d have never heard me just now, but for that paperwork.”

“Why do you do that?”

“Just getting ready for the day someone tries to creep up on me.”

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“Where?”

“I don’t know. In some parking lot.”

“You have enemies from being the executioner?”

“None I know about. That’s actually made me a pretty popular fellow around here.”

Miles past the checkpoint, Hocutt nods over my head and says we’re still driving past prison grounds. “Everything to your right, as far as you can see, is Parchman. We’ll have guys escaping sometimes, and I’ll catch them, two, three days later, deep into the woods. They look sad that they’ve been apprehended, but you really have to see their faces when I tell them they never even made it off the penitentiary grounds.”

He points to the raised train bed of the old Illinois Central, ten feet past the road’s right shoulder, and tells me about taking the train up those tracks when he was young to see his grandmother in Memphis. Over the raised bed, a half mile into the unfenced prison grounds, you can see the pink guard tower of Parchman’s old maximum security unit. The smokestack of the gas chamber in the adjoining death house is just visible to the right of the tower. “When I was a kid on the train,” he says, “I’d get a seat on the left and start looking out the window half an hour before we even got to that pink tower, just to make sure I didn’t miss it. You can see, this isn’t the most beautiful countryside, but it looked like something out of Marco Polo to me.” When he came back from Memphis at night on the Midnight Special, he’d sit on the right and fight sleep, just to make sure he’d see the tower again, glimmering in the lights of the prison farm.

“I love the Parchman State Penitentiary,” Hocutt says with sudden emotion, taking weight off the pedal. “And I have no regrets about giving it the twenty best years of my life. I just can’t be there no more, that’s all. To answer your question, though. It is kind of hard for me to leave.”

I ask if the fate of Parchman’s gas chamber is weighing on him. Hocutt’s identification with it is strong, and the chamber has several parallels with his life and career. Installed in 1955 the year he was born, it was shut down in 1972, when the Supreme Court abolished capital punishment in America, then reopened when the Court reinstated the penalty in 1977, months after he began work at Parchman. A month ago, just as Hocutt’s medical discharge from state service came through, the chamber was all but banned by the Jackson legislature as part of Mississippi’s eleven-year move toward lethal injection as its method of execution.

“It’s just a relic,” he shrugs. “Of the sixty-plus men on death row now, they’re all due to go by the needle, except for five who are grandfathered in for the gas. Two of them are severely retarded and a third changes personalities every day—Billy the Kid, Napoleon, Jack the Ripper. They’ve been talking about unbolting the chamber and putting it on display in Jackson, but no museum’s shown any interest. Kind of surprises me. That chamber’s got a lot of history to it.”

“It’s funny. People love the death penalty. They come up all the time, asking me about executions. Once I get started, though, they really don’t want to hear *too* much about it. You know, I never heard of no kid telling his dad, *When I grow up, I want to be the executioner*. But when I was starting off as a Parchman guard, I couldn’t wait for my shifts to come.” Hocutt

face clouds over and he shakes his head. "I'm really not feeling too good today."

On the truck's cell phone, he hits the speed dial for the Memphis psychopharmacologist who prescribed a strong mood elevator for him a few days ago. It's not the first drug doctor he's tried. At forty-two, Hocutt is "shot from the ground up": gout, maturity-onset diabetes, diverticulitis, arthritis in his upper body, partial deafness in one ear. His mind hasn't been right for years. Depressions steal over him, and for weeks he finds it almost impossible to get out of bed; the depths are followed by spurts of glee filled with plans and fantasy that keep him up at night. At the slightest provocation, he falls into rages and incessant replays of some injustice, violence, or close call from his two decades on the job, and he broods endlessly about the fight he's waged with the State of Mississippi for the past three years to get a full medical discharge. The net result is morbid hatred—"a constant negative draw," he sometimes calls it. "Like I'm on a planet where gravity is five times denser than on Earth."

The nurse who takes his call in Memphis is the one he likes. "What's it going to take before I feel better?" he asks plaintively, his voice up half an octave.

"Your new medication's operating on a different part of the brain," she assures him over the speakerphone. I can hear why he likes her. Her voice, a gravelly smoker's voice, soothing in its lack of affect—you can tell she isn't bullshitting—and her accent is strong the way Hocutt likes it: not just southern, but deep country. When she says *brain*, it sounds like *brine*. "It might take another two weeks for it to become fully thair-apeutic. But you know that, Donald. What else is bothering you, hon?"

"I'm fine." Hocutt says nothing for a second or two, then thanks her before hanging up.

"It's probably just the thought of another day without a decent meal," he says a mile down the road. His various medicines, in combination, wreak havoc on his stomach, and his diet is limited and alien to him. "There's also all this fat to deal with," he says. "I've always been big, but never like this." Several doctors have told Hocutt that his weight makes his ailments severe in themselves, potentially life-threatening. "I really don't care if I live or die," he says—a refrain so familiar I tend to tune it out, until I remind myself that this is an executioner talking about living under a death sentence. "I figure I've got three or four years left, anyway you look at it. I just want to be around to see Mark [his ten-year-old] play football. So take the pills and follow these diets. For the most part." The latest has him down to a glass of skim milk, two bananas, an oatmeal cookie, and a dozen pills for breakfast. The rest of the day is at the mercy of mood swings and the medications' side effects. Sudden rages or fits of gloom send him straight to the fridge or the nearest Sonic or Checkers, as though he could eat his way out. The diuretics he takes for gout make him urinate frequently, throwing his electrolytes off. To restore the lost potassium, he eats bananas, a half dozen at a sitting, sometimes, and they bind him up terribly.

"Fuck it," he says, hitting the speed dial for a greasy spoon two miles ahead. He tells the woman who answers it's Colonel Hocutt calling, and to have a burger and a large fries ready. "Sound good?" he asks me.

"Sure."

"Make it two. I'll take mine all the way."

“Tell me about it,” the woman says.

“I like mine piled with fixings and dressing,” he explains sheepishly when she hangs up. “Piled so high the grease goes down your elbow when you bite into the burger. Do we really have to go to this graveyard?”

Hocutt has offered to take me on a tour of Jimmy Lee Gray’s grave outside Indianola, half an hour down 49W. Several times this morning, he’s tried to talk me out of going, then just quickly talked himself back into it. Twelve years have passed since Jimmy Lee Gray was executed in Parchman’s gas chamber, but people keep asking for a tour of the grave from Hocutt, who mixed the sulfuric acid bath that dissolved the cyanide that killed Gray. Hocutt usually takes the people who ask, though he says there’s nothing to see. “They always spend a lot of time by his stone, for reasons I cannot fathom,” he tells me. “No one except the lawyers, church ladies, and the death penalty weirdos took any interest in Jimmy Lee Gray while he was alive. People on death row get a lot of mail, you’d be surprised, but he didn’t. His family never visited, and his victims’ families didn’t show up for his asphyxiation. Even the guys on the row didn’t want to know nothing about him, and they’re so low they need binoculars to see a centipede shit.”

Gray was famous enough afterward. He took a long time to die, or so most of the witnesses to his asphyxiation claimed. A doctor monitoring his heartbeat on a remote EKG said he was clinically dead two minutes into the execution, but his head banged back repeatedly on the ventilation pipe behind the chair in the chamber, and the legend has grown that his death was a ten-minute torture. It was the first time in nineteen years that the gas chamber had been used, and it was the beginning of the end for it. By turns, Hocutt says he believes the doctor’s assessment of a quick death and that he truly doesn’t care.

“I could have sat on Jimmy Lee and ate a sandwich while he asphyxiated,” he tells me. “It wasn’t pretty, and the appearance of it having been bungled reflected badly on the State of Mississippi, but Jimmy Lee Gray was a piece of shit. He took a three-year-old girl into the logging woods outside Pascagoula, raped her, sodomized her, pushed her face into a bog by a drainage ditch until she choked on mud, then threw her body off a bridge into a stream. As far as I’m concerned, Jimmy Lee Gray died too painlessly. He’s really the only one I wish they could have done differently.”

“How?”

“That’s legal?”

A cousin of Hocutt’s, a massive man named Red, is at a window table in the greasy spot when we pull up. They talk about catfish farms and last year’s soybean crop and gossip about people they recognize driving by on 49W while we eat. Hocutt and I plow through two-inch-tall burgers while Red carves mouthfuls off a dainty square of gray meat in butcher paper with a penknife. I ask if it’s pâté he’s eating.

“We call it sow,” says Red.

“Pig liver?”

“I think they grind the whole animal up.” He looks at it. “Just real concentrated, I guess. What brings you down?”

I tell him we're headed to see Jimmy Lee Gray's grave.

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The cousins exchange a glance over their food. "What do you think, Red?" Hocutt asks with a deadpan look. "Think he's still dead?"

Red wipes both sides of his penknife on the butcher paper and folds up the remainder of his meat square. "I guess you got him pretty good, Donald."

"Guess we did at that." Hocutt cleans grease off his lips with a napkin, and throws it like a white towel over the last quarter of his burger. "You know, I really don't mind going out to that graveyard," he says. "Fire ants are thick up there, but they're no problem if you know where not to step. It's pretty peaceful, actually."

The graveyard is on one of the delta's rare promontories, off a winding, rutted blacktop road from a cypress grove. Hocutt points to where Jimmy Lee Gray lies, says to take as long as you like, then picks up a stick, walks to the end of the yard, and settles down cross-legged with his back against a huge tree. Gray's stone is a generic red slab etched with his name, date, and some minimal scrollwork. I spend a long time in front of it, mostly looking at the final date, September 2, 1983. "Now it is a terrible business," wrote G. K. Chesterton, "to make out a man for the vengeance of man." I feel that strongly, looking at the ordained date of Jimmy Lee Gray's death: the *terrible business of the vengeance of man*.

"I want a simple stone for myself," Hocutt says when I join him under the tree. "The classical shape with the round top and the beveled edges. They just get better-looking as time goes by." His face looks like an old tombstone: heavy, impassive, full of resignation and imponderable meaning. With the stick, he points out stones that are centuries old, lingering with approval on a few that are so deep-sunk and weathered you can't read their inscription. "There'll be nothing on mine but the name and dates. Maybe a little something like, *He raised two sons and now it's time to rest a spell.*"

"Do you think much about an afterlife?"

"I believe that life on earth is hell."

He jabs the ground with the end of his stick. "I have thought about it. You can't put a man to death and not have it cross your mind. *Where's this guy going from here?* I have no idea there's an afterlife, but if there is one, right here is pretty much how I see it for myself sitting back against an old tree for a long time, wiping your brow, and just saying, *Phew. made it.*"



## THE “PECULIAR INSTITUTION” OF AMERICAN EXECUTIONS

IN 1995, WHEN I BEGAN *THE LAST FACE YOU’LL EVER SEE*, 77 percent of Americans favored the death penalty. A year later, I redraft this introduction in late 2000, the Harris Poll shows that sentiment has dropped to 66 percent; subsequent and more extensive polls show the numbers softening further. The radical shift of opinion is generally attributed to the recent suspension of Illinois executions by Governor George Ryan, a pro-penalty man who’d been moved by proof of widespread evidence of innocence on his state’s death row.

On my desk is a clipping from yesterday’s *New York Times* about a Supreme Court stay of the execution of a severely retarded Texas man—a story that snagged front-page space from the postelection fight over recounting Florida ballots for the U.S. presidency; buried in today’s paper is a brief wire item about last night’s lethal injection in Texas (of a different condemned man), which brought that state within two executions of a record year. A poll in yesterday’s *Times* showed 60 percent of Americans favoring a recount of the Florida ballots; on the radio this morning, I hear that number has dropped to 45 percent. “Americans want closure,” said the news anchor, adding, a few sentences later, “You’re watching democracy in action.”

It is against this backdrop—of mass opinion swaying on whether someone should live or die, of democracy as a daily PR battle between opinions posing as truth, fact, or law—that this book about executioners makes most sense. Other than abortion, there is simply no issue on which opinions are more divided, deeply felt, and yet inconstant, or where contentiousness blurs the reality of the event so strongly. Thus, I focus on the coup de grace itself, taking a mandate from two sentences in Albert Camus’s “Meditations on the Guillotine”: “[We] must show the executioner’s hands each time and force everyone to look at them. ... Otherwise society admits that it kills without knowing what it is saying or doing.”

I undertook this imperative not as some existential errand but out of curiosity. I wanted to know who carried out executions, where, when, and how, and what it had been like for them to do it. As I gathered details, however, I saw that these concerns addressed only the *doing* of Camus’s sentences, not the *saying*, and that brought me to a further question, both simple and more difficult to answer: *Why* did they do it? Or more exactly, Why do we *want* to do it?

Though even asking such a question implies the second, moral question—“Is the death penalty right or wrong?”—I have made no attempt to answer that in this book. I wouldn’t ask it of an executioner to begin with, and after living with the complexities of executions for five years while researching and writing this book, I feel only more agnostic on the issue than when I began. Instead, I have tried to simplify my “deep structure” by asking only about the *motive* of capital punishment, much as a death penalty statute asks after the motive of a capital crime. Is an execution a rational mechanism—i.e., a tool of deterrence, punishment, or jurisprudence by which a certain type of murderer is, in John Stuart Mill’s words, “solemnly blotted out from the fellowship of mankind”? Or is it something altogether

different—an expression of an irrational urge far more subterranean than the will to justice?

Americans rarely ask such a question, because generally they know the answer. They do something because they want to, and because they can. A contemporary American execution, scorned by abolitionists abroad and at home as a form of moral backwardness, is probably nothing of the kind. Like mid-nineteenth-century slavery, it is rather our “peculiar institution”—and as anyone who has toured a death row or attended an execution can attest, the will to enslave and the will to execute are either the same or remarkably similar. The comparison first suggested itself to me in the Deep South’s death houses, which sit in prison farms culled from former plantations, but it was reinforced, time and again, in the abjection I’ve seen on the faces of men on death rows across America—a beaten, naked, animal look that one sees nowhere else. Whether one is for or against the penalty, there is simply no denying that an execution is an extreme act of subjection.

While almost every nation we would compare ourselves to has given up killing its citizens, calling it a “primitive” or “barbarous” act, an execution is something we are able to continue to do not because we are more primitive or barbarous, but because we have adapted. A twentieth-century European executioner (save the occasional military-minded firing squad) killed in the primal manner of their predecessors—by attacking the neck, with a rope, guillotine, garrote, ax, or saber. America spent the century “civilizing” executions, through innovation: with the electric chair, an attempt by the New York State Legislature of 1890 to move past the brutality of the rope; with the gas chamber, used first in Nevada in 1924 when the abhorrence for the gallows had led to a moratorium on the penalty; and with the lethal injection gurney.

All three forms expressed the national will to get things done. It is probably no coincidence that Thomas Edison, *ne plus ultra* of American “can-do,” was intimately involved with the first five electrocutions, or that a leading East Coast toxicologist who had seen the effects of German gas attacks in World War I came up with the idea of “canning” prussic gas in a chamber. Methods for humanely dispatching the condemned with lethal drugs had been considered by state legislators since the nineteenth century, but it took what has become known as the unofficial moratorium on capital punishment—the years 1967–77, in which no American was executed—to finally effect the adoption of the needle.

That unprecedented ten-year span, not coincidentally the only years in which a majority of Americans were consistently against the penalty, represents more than a hiatus in execution. Like much that happened in the sixties, it was the end of something—in this case, a national will/desire to legally kill. That has clearly come back, but its expression is utterly changed. Compare today’s somber, self-searching execution coverage to the “Gwoin to Heaven”-style headlines of 1933, the previous peak in frequency and popularity of the penalty. Executions were a kind of public burning even then. Conducted largely inside prison walls, they caught the homicidal passion of the masses in a way that would be unthinkable today. The executioner was still a public figure, and he had to be. He expressed a desire that was still very public.

All American executioners except one retired or died during the unofficial moratorium. The exception, whom we’ll meet in [Chapter 3](#), was a Mississippian named Thomas Berry Bruce, who had been executing since 1951. The link he provides—both to current executioners and

the underlying motives of the penalty—is the first of two reasons I chose to situate the bulk of this book in Mississippi.

In 1972, only 40 percent of Americans polled by the Gallup organization favored execution. A month after the poll was issued, the Supreme Court abolished every capital punishment law in the nation, finding, in *Furman v. Georgia*, that the penalty had been wielded inhumanely and arbitrarily, violations of the Eighth Amendment protection against cruel and unusual punishment. It was a momentous decision, ending a practice that had taken the lives of some 18,000 Americans, and forever sparing 629 then on death row.

As the law of the land, however, *Furman* lasted less than five years. A 5–4 decision in which all nine justices wrote individual opinions, several of which varied radically in tone and stance, it was the longest judgment the Court ever handed down. Essentially, it was less a mandate against capital punishment than an indecisive text from which future legal debate of the death penalty would spring: the punishment hadn't been wielded for six years, and there were no serious execution dates impending, so the decision wasn't stopping anything. Rather, its length and divisiveness provided states largely with guidance in revising statutes. This was hardly unnoticed by pro-penalty theorists, state legislators, and district attorneys from Florida to California, states that combed *Furman's* nine opinions, overhauled capital statutes, and within a year had begun to prosecute death sentences again.

In 1976, as opinion in favor of executions rose to 66 percent, the Court upheld Georgia's most recently revised capital statute, which had been the basis of a death sentence meted out in *Gregg v. Georgia*. Along with guidelines gleaned from two other death sentences the Court had thrown out earlier in 1976—as coming from revised statutes that were still “unduly harsh,” “unworkably rigid,” or below the “evolving standards of decency that mark the progress of a maturing society”—the reaffirmation with *Gregg* paved the way for any state that wished to resume executing.

There were many. Before *Furman*, most of the thirty-two states that still executed had obsolete death penalty laws, some dating from territorial days. By the time *Gregg* came down, thirty-five state legislatures were debating, drafting, or revising capital punishment laws, and a new 600-plus men and women sat on death rows across the country. After the opinionated ambivalence of *Furman*—“a badly orchestrated opera,” as one critic put it, “with nine characters taking turns to offer their own arias”—the mandate offered by *Gregg* and the other 1976 Court decisions was highly pragmatic: Decide for yourselves who, why, where, when, and how you convict, imprison, and execute, but avoid any impression that the penalty had been sought, arrived at, or inflicted in a manner that seems unduly harsh, unworkably rigid, indecent, etc. In short, let no one be able to say your actions were arbitrary or inhumane.

As state legislatures edited post-*Gregg* statutes to accommodate the who, why, where, and when of this new mandate, wardens of the thirty-five prisons housing death chambers had to answer the how. It wasn't easy. Nine years had now passed since the last American had been executed, and in 1976 it was all but impossible to find gas-chamber and electric-chair experts. Missouri's chamber leaked. No one in North Carolina knew how to turn theirs on. Nevada's two-seated chamber in the state prison at Carson City had become the guards' pinball room, and its ventilation stack sagged. South Carolina needed a new cap for the head electrode of

its electric chair and no one knew where to get one. Officials in Tennessee couldn't even tell the front from the back of their headcap. In Angola State Prison, shortly after Louisiana's revised capital punishment statute passed on appeal to the Supreme Court, Warden John Blackburn took the massive black electric chair out of storage in the garage of the warden's mansion. His wife had asked several times during the moratorium if she could paint it white, cut a hole in the seat, and use it as a planter, but Blackburn had a thing for electric chairs. He kept a three-inch replica on his desk that gave anyone who touched it a small shock, and he roared with laughter every time someone fell for it.

Florida's wardens, prior to executing John Spenkellink on May 25, 1979 (America's first electrocution in thirteen years), scoured the nation for electrocution experts, found none, and simply drew up the best protocol they could. They knew their chair used a two-minute cycle of varying voltages, but they had also been told by old-timers that it was never allowed to run that long. An abbreviated cycle was used, and it took three separate attempts to kill Spenkellink. Four years later, when Alabama electrocuted for the first time post-*Gregg*, the jacks connecting the chair to the generator were so poorly wired that three separate cycles were needed to kill John Louis Evans III, who suffered for twenty minutes while his lawyer screamed, "This is cruel and unusual punishment!" Governor George Wallace, reached by phone halfway through, told the executioner, Warden Charlie Jones, to continue until the sentence was carried out.

But writing protocols and equipping old chairs and chambers, as post-*Gregg* executioners learned, was only the beginning of their burden. The world had changed, "standards of decency" had indeed evolved, and what had been seen as an ugly but necessary job no longer seemed "unduly harsh" to many. In 1979, the anthropologist Colin Turnbull, allowed to tour Virginia's death row, in a basement of the Spring Street Maximum Security Prison in Richmond, got a sense of the antique gruesomeness of an electrocution, which would remain the most common form of American execution until it was overtaken by lethal injection in 1991. Off the death chamber, Turnbull found a "sandbag room," where the contorted corpses taken from the chair had been manually broken back into shape over a period of hours by the weight of the bags.

The violent spectacle of electrocutions surprised and baffled the new executioners as well. When Robert Wayne Williams was put to death in Angola's chair in 1983, Louisiana's first execution in nineteen years, wardens were amazed that the chair literally cooked Williams' scalp and legs, which smoked and sizzled for several minutes. Twenty-four hours later, the corpse reeked so strongly that mourners found it difficult to remain in the funeral parlour where Williams was laid out. Angola's warden, Ross Maggio, had to call sources outside the prison simply to learn if this was the way it was supposed to happen.

The gas chamber was harder still for many to watch in action. The apparent violence of asphyxiations grievously offended post-*Gregg* witnesses in state after state, from the 1980 execution of Jimmy Lee Gray in Mississippi to the gassing of Donald Eugene Harding, on April 11, 1992, Arizona's first execution in thirty years. A Tucson television reporter sobbed uncontrollably during Harding's ten-minute execution; two other reporters "were rendered walking 'vegetables' for days"; the attorney general vomited halfway through; a prison staff member who ran the execution likened it to watching a man suffer a series of heart attacks.

and the prison's pro-penalty warden said he'd resign if the state told him to run another asphyxiation. But Harding's death was probably no different from those suffered in Arizona's chamber since it was installed as "a humane measure" in 1933, replacing a gallows that had decapitated a condemned woman.

The difference was really only one of perception, but over time it was big enough to put an end to these old methods. Contemporary distaste for asphyxiations was most apparent (and documented) with the famous "Green Room" in the basement of California's San Quentin Prison. The nation's busiest chamber for thirty-five years before *Furman*, it saw only two post-*Gregg* asphyxiations, though the state's death row population was America's largest for much of the last quarter of the twentieth century. U.S. District Court Judge Marilyn Hall Patel, faced with ACLU lawsuits challenging the chamber as cruel and unusual punishment, ordered a videotape made of the 1992 asphyxiation of Robert Alton Harris, then studied detailed medical records of past asphyxiations, depositions of Holocaust survivors, and expert testimony on cyanide poisoning. She banished the chamber two years later, declaring Harris's asphyxiation "comparable to disembowelment, drawing and quartering, and burning at the stake." Compare this to earlier language, of the California Supreme Court, in *People v. Daugherty* (1953). That court, which had examined fifteen years of medical records, said the chamber met "contemporary scientific standards. ... For many years," it reasoned, "animals have been put to death painlessly by the administration of poison gas."

The two courts were separated by forty years, but they looked at the same act. Medical records show that Robert Alton Harris's ten-minute death in 1992 was similar to what had been suffered by the condemned since December 1938, when California switched from the gallows to gas. The chamber was in good condition in 1992, the old executioners had left a nine-page protocol for its operation, and the wardens even had a scrapbook, offered by Joe Ferretti, the retired, diminutive, seventy-nine-year-old guard who had served as a death watch "baby-sitter," an officer who sits out the final hours with the condemned. A litany of last nights, words, meals, and idiosyncracies of the 129 executions Ferretti had worked, the scrapbook was most telling in what it omitted: that the condemned appeared to strangle for anywhere from one to seven minutes before losing consciousness. For Ferretti, by several accounts a "solicitous," "sensitive" man who had become intimate with the condemned in their last hours, that apparent suffering wasn't noteworthy. An open secret, perhaps a slight embarrassment, it was *implicit* in the penalty, as indeed it always had been.

After *Furman*, however, the spectacle, legacy, or threat of the violence of the chair and chamber made it progressively difficult for states without lethal injection to execute. Difficulties like Alabama, Arkansas, California, the Carolinas, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, Nebraska, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, and Washington fought through the 1980s and 1990s to retain their old methods, which, somehow, continued to meet the "evolving standards" of the Supreme Court. In 1996, for example, the Court set aside Judge Patel's ruling, briefly reopening California's chamber, and throughout the 1990s it upheld the constitutionality of Florida's chair—the nation's busiest—despite a spate of horrific electrocutions. Instead, it was pro-penalty state legislators and governors who gave in, frustrated by the snail's pace caused by ongoing legal challenges to the old methods. The Arizona House of Representatives voted to banish its chamber and switched to lethal injection three weeks after Donald Harding's gruesome death. North Carolina closed its chamber after

the 1994 asphyxiation of David Lawson, who went to his death screaming, "I'm human, I'm human." Maryland's chamber was outlawed in 1997, Mississippi's in 1998. Before *Furman* there were eleven gas chambers operating—all have since been closed. As of this writing only Alabama continues to electrocute with any frequency.

There may well be a similar argument, two or three decades hence, about the humaneness of lethal injections. The \$70 of chemicals that effect death, known among correctional professionals as Texas Mix, or Texas Tea, are kept in separate drip bags on an IV stand in an unseen executioner's room. The drip bags are connected to one or two central tubes, which are run out to the death chamber and hooked to a catheter attached to a needle that has been inserted in the arm of the condemned. The three drugs are injected in stages, with a wash of distilled water run between each through the tubes (and the condemned), as the poisons clump and throw off a viscous white precipitate when combined.

The first drug is either sodium thiopental or sodium pentothal, which slackens the muscles, depresses the central nervous system, and induces something resembling sleep; the pancuronium bromide or Pavulon (artificial drugs similar to curare, used by Amerindians on poison arrow tips) is administered, to attack the lungs; and finally, potassium chloride, an electrolyte that, in large doses, reverses the polarity of the heart muscles, causing failure. All three are used in common medical practice—the sodium compounds are still used in dental anesthesia; curare, greatly diluted, of course, is a homeopathic remedy for anxiety; potassium chloride is prescribed for heart fibrillation. This quasi-medicinality enables the common opinion that lethal injections are like "putting people to sleep," a homespun wisdom first offered in 1973 by then California governor Ronald Reagan, who cited his years as "a farmer and horse raiser" in making the assertion.

Consciousness is a relative thing, however, particularly when large amounts of strong drugs are involved. Thiopental and pentothal certainly make the condemned appear to lose consciousness, but there is no way of measuring this: all three parts of the lethal cocktail are of a sufficient dose to cause death by themselves. The sodium compounds, however, may only render the condemned incapable of expressing the pain and panic that a poison like Pavulon would cause anyone even remotely conscious, or the subsequent terror when the heart's rhythm is suddenly altered. If so, death by lethal injection may not be the euthanasia of common perception but a chemical entombment, lasting anywhere from two to ten minutes.

Statistically speaking, however, the gurney's medical image has gone a long way toward anesthetizing us to an execution's reality. Pro-penalty sentiment reached its peak in the years 1989–94, topping out at 79 percent, exactly as electric chairs and gas chambers were closing down and the needle became the abiding metaphor of American executions. Hence, the second reason this book is weighted toward the four Mississippi executions—they happened in a gas chamber. Short of a botched hanging, it is the most unattractive method this country has to offer, the most onerous on the men who carry it out, and therefore the best locus for examining the deeper motive behind an execution: a contemporary executioner could not do more than one without having his resolve (and motive) tested. As the reader will see, asphyxiations drove one executioner out of a lifetime career in corrections, and another dec

into the hell of this “terrible business [of] the vengeance of man” that I set out to explore.

The gas chamber also sorely tested the will to execute of one of America’s more strident pro-penalty populations. The four gassings chronicled in this book were the only executions Mississippi managed to carry out in the last quarter of the century, despite the fact that the state sits in the middle of what’s known as the Death Belt, the 900-mile swath across the Deep South that, since 1976, has been the heart of capital punishment in America.

## THE DEATH BELT: FLORIDA TO TEXAS

THERE WERE 358 EXECUTIONS between 1976 and 1996, the first twenty years after the death penalty returned to America. Sixty percent were carried out within a two-hour drive of Interstate 10, the southernmost of the coast-to-coast highways. The five eastern states of I-10 are called the Death Belt because of the disproportionate number of executions carried out in their prison farms: in “Old Sparky,” Florida’s three-legged brown electric chair, which sits in a small, brightly lit room in the state prison at Starke; in “Yellow Mama,” the chubby yellow electric chair at Holman State Prison in Atmore, Alabama; in “Black Death,” the metal chair in Parchman State Penitentiary’s silver gas chamber; in Louisiana’s lime-green death house, five miles deep into the woods of Angola, an hour north of Baton Rouge; on the lethal-injection gurney in the midnight-blue death chamber of the “Walls Unit,” the massive brick prison that occupies much of downtown Huntsville, Texas. Run a finger down a list of the condemned and notice the three-part names: John Louis Evans III, Jimmy Lee Gray, Robert Wayne Williams, James Dupree Henry, Alpha Otis Stevens, Robert Lee Willie, Edward Earl Johnson, Connie Ray Evans, Arthur Lee Jones, Andrew Lee Jones. That’s when you know you’re in the Death Belt.

A large, unpainted wood-frame house in Headland, Alabama, fifty miles from I-10, is a curious first stop on any trip through the Death Belt. The ancestral home of Watt Espy, America’s foremost historian of executions, it also serves as the offices of his Capital Punishment Research Project. An unfunded, unaffiliated, one-man attempt to collect every available fact about the American death penalty, it is a project to which he has devoted most of his adult life.

Espy, who greets me at the door, is a tall, thin man in black frame glasses, a polo shirt, khaki pants, and tennis shoes with prim anklet socks. He smiles a lot when he speaks, heavily preoccupied smiles filled with a mournful irony. “These are the condemned,” he says, pointing to the head shots, mug shots, wire photos, and book and magazine clippings, all individually framed, that fill the walls. Many hang at derelict angles, others have a crack in the frame glass, and a few show the yellow discoloration that comes with prints taken too soon from the hypo bath, but there’s no mistaking the passion with which they were assembled.

Espy tells me their stories, one at a time: a man who willed himself into a coma and had to be carried to the chair; another who strolled in blithely, saying, “I’d ruther be fishin’”; one who came in with a cigar and a pink flower in his buttonhole; a man who had printed the prison tattoo H-A-R-D L-U-C-K on his knuckles; another who handed the electrocutioner a check for his \$150 fee, signed “The Devil”; one who asked for bicarbonate of soda before entering the gas chamber; one who said the soup of his last meal was too hot; one who complained from the electric chair, “I sick. I eat too much.” Ones who read verse: “Hang me high/And stretch me wide/So the world can see/How free I died,” or quoted rap: “You can be a king/or a street-sweeper./But everyone gotta dance/with the Grim Reaper.” Those who told their executioners, “Step on the gas”; or “I came here to die, not to talk”; “I am Jesus Christ”; “Hurry it up, you Hoosier bastard”; a woman who warned, “My blood will burn



holes in their bodies.”

A thin strip of wall in Espy’s office bears the house’s only images of the living. Six are of his family, including three of an older brother who runs the local savings bank. The other is a head shot of Mario Cuomo, who vetoed every capital punishment statute drafted by the New York State Legislature in his twelve years as governor. “As you might guess,” Espy boasts, “I’m a bit of an abolitionist myself.” He’s also proud to be a recovering alcoholic. “I stayed drunk for the only execution that I will ever attend. It made me physically ill. I vomited.”

“Which was that?”

“That would be the botched electrocution of John Louis Evans the Third, State of Alabama, April twenty-second, nineteen eighty-three.”

The office, once the living room, has a cranky old copier, a low-end computer, a magnificent library of books on the death penalty, a few dozen photos of the condemned, and a row of file cabinets from the Dewey decimal era, which Espy uses to store execution quotes, names, and factoids on four- by five-inch index cards. The large room is otherwise given entirely to shelves stacked with loose-leaf binders formerly used by traveling salesmen. The binders, which Espy buys for a dime apiece in close-out sales, are mystifying at first, as they have their original logos on the spines and covers—everything from Coca-Cola to local hardware companies. Inside each, Espy tells me, are the details of an era’s executions, arranged alphabetically state by state. “That’s Indiana behind you”—he points to a half dozen binders—“then over into Idaho, Kansas on the far side, down into Louisiana, Mississippi, up through Nevada, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and down again into Texas, which is taking up its share of my attention these days.”

I tell Espy I’m headed to Huntsville to see a condemned man, Noble Mays, with whom I exchanged letters, then to Louisiana to attend the lethal injection of a man named Anton James. Espy asks how I feel about corresponding with a condemned man.

“It’s a little creepy,” I admit.

“I’ve learned to avoid all contact, though they write me often.” Espy seems to have mixed feelings about my attending an execution as well, though his eyes light up when I mention I’ll be going through New Orleans. “I haven’t been there for ages,” he says. For the first time, I notice the room has no windows. The house is extremely dark.

Espy has supported the project with odd jobs—selling cemetery plots or the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* door-to-door. Once a year, he borrows against stocks held in trust, and he says he’s having a hard time keeping the project going. At the time we meet, he has chronicled the details of 18,812 American executions—by hanging, shooting, electrocution, gassing, lethal injection, burning, beheading, entombment, gibbeting, breaking on the wheel, boiling in oil, roasting, drowning, etc.—more than 10,000 of which were unknown to posterity before he tracked them down. *Uncollected* is the word Espy prefers. “Virginia leads by far,” he says. “Two thousand and forty-nine thus far.”

“Why Virginia?”

“Because they executed so many slaves. The closer you get to the Mason-Dixon Line, the more perilous it’s been, historically, to be of color. My records show that clearly.”

Truly grotesque executions tended toward the north of the Mason-Dixon Line, Espy

emphasizes, though he has collected a fair share of Death Belt horror stories. He wax particularly eloquent on Louisiana, where slaves and mutineers were nailed into boxes and then sawed in half, roasted on cannon barrels, or sewn into a leather sack with a dog, viper, monkey, and cock and thrown into the river. “But the worst was of a slave in colonial New York who poisoned her master. Spit-roasted on a slow fire for hours and hours”—Espy goes up to enter a name in a massive accountant’s ledger on an old lectern—“with a horn full of cool water held inches from her lips, to accentuate her agony. In the modern era, we’ve lost sight of the fact that executions were meant to inflict not only death but pain.

“Make that eighteen thousand, eight hundred, and *thirteen*.” He inscribes the man’s name, speaking phonetically as he writes: “Nelson Shelton, Midnight, March the seventeenth, nineteen hundred ninety-five. State of Maryland. I’ve been busy all morning and forgot to put his name in. It was going to be eighteen thousand, eight hundred fourteen, in a double execution, rare for the State of Maryland, but his brother received a stay, so he could leave his kidney to their ailing mother.” He returns to his desk. “And he doesn’t have long, does he?”

“Is that your Book of the Dead?”

“I just call it Ledger Number One. So tell me what brings you down here.”

I’m ten words into quoting Camus’s sentences when Espy smiles by way of interruption. “There’s a problem with that very beautiful quote,” he says. “Camus meant it as a challenge of course, but society actually kills best and most frequently when it knows *exactly* what it is saying and doing. If my research bears out any one truth, it’s that.”

As Espy speaks, I remember some difficulty I’d had verifying a story Charles Manson told of his mother witnessing a hanging in the late 1930s in Kentucky’s Moundsville Prison, where he was four years old. In Manson’s telling, his mother had been hiding near the gallows, trying to avoid her work detail, when the hanged man’s head was ripped off by the fall from the gallows and rolled past her. “That would be the Hyer case,” Espy says without blinking. “And given security conditions in Moundsville in that period, yes, it would have been possible for her to have witnessed an execution she had no right to. And who knows but what effect seeing that had on her, and eventually had on her four-year-old progeny? See, I believe that more than one person dies with each execution. They exert a horror and a fascination that never really goes away.”

Espy dates his fascination with executions to a UPI wire sent out on the morning of June 20, 1953, when he was the teletype operator for the U.S. Navy base in French Morocco. The subject was the Rosenbergs’ electrocution, and much of the crew was waiting outside his office for the message. “Six bells from the teletype,” Espy remembers. “Then it came: ETHEL HAS HOT PANTS. It was just some wire stringer’s puerile joke, but I’ll never forget it.”

Years before evidence emerged that Julius Rosenberg had in fact delivered military secrets to the Russians, Espy had investigated the case and come to the decision that Julius, and perhaps also Ethel, didn’t belong in his file of *Wrongful Executions—Confirmed Innocent*. “That was a painful conclusion,” Espy says, handing me the file, “because their deaths put me on my life’s work.” It’s that honesty, however, that enables Espy to earn an occasional, much-needed fee as an expert witness in capital punishment trials. As every lawyer learns from Espy, the difficulty in assembling accurate execution data comes from the mixture of sensationalism and obscurity that surrounds the practice. “Executions tend toward glaring

headlines,” he says, “but the details have a way of being omitted, gotten wrong, misinterpreted, hidden, whatever.”

An abolitionist from Brooklyn Law School, for example, has hired Espy to determine the races of every criminal killed in New York’s three electric chairs, as well as the races of the victims. “The assignment, simple on the face, has already taken the better part of two weeks,” says Espy. An explanation of his difficulties leads to a long digression on William Kemmler—the first person to die by electrocution, in Auburn, New York, on August 6, 1890. I learn much about the man that is nowhere in the vast literature on his case: from the alias he lived under to the little-known fact that his victim, almost universally misidentified as his wife (whom he had abandoned), was in fact a mistress. “His story,” says Espy, “was dramatic, to say the least.”

“Why?” I ask. “Wasn’t he just a drunk who killed someone with an ax in a stupor?”

“A hatchet,” he corrects. “And, no, I don’t believe he was *just* a drunk. Murder, of the state-sanctioned type I fight, or the crimes that it is meant to fight, is never *just* anything. It is an unspeakable drama. Its impact is of the religious variety.”

Espy’s *Confirmed Innocents* file is thinner than the list given in the authoritative 1987 study by professors Hugo Adam Bedau and Michael L. Radelet. “Theirs,” Espy says, “includes Bruno Hauptmann, executed for the death of the Lindbergh baby, which I’m afraid I can’t connect with. They were right about Sacco, though perhaps not Vanzetti. But in their case, confirmed innocence isn’t the issue so much as the conduct of the trial judge, Webster Thayer, who announced to the courtroom, ‘I’m gonna burn those anarchist sons of bitches.’ Bartolomeo Vanzetti may have been an anarchist, but he was not a son of a bitch. He was a beautiful man. Webster Thayer was the son of a bitch. You’ve come to ask me about executioners. Sometimes you really don’t have to look further than the trial judge. Now do you?”

Espy’s *Executioners* file is also very thin. “They’re a rare breed. There’ve been dearths in this country, where the lesser of two criminals hanged the other, or where a condemned man escaped death by becoming the hangman. That scenario is typical throughout history.” The file’s contents are mostly clippings from pulp detective magazines of the first half of the century, one of Espy’s major tools for researching executions. The house is stacked with them: *Official Detective*. *Best Detective*. *True Detective*. *Fast Detective*. *Best True Fast Detective*. “These articles are of uneven reliability, but they’re all I have to offer,” Espy says as he hands me the file. “You’re headed into terra incognita. A lot of stuff is unknown and a lot of what’s ‘known’ is just plumb made up.”

“I Executed Miles Fuller,” the oldest clip, is the anonymous account of how an out-of-work steward from the Montana Cooks and Waiters Union became a hangman. It provides “no facts otherwise unknown” (at least to Espy), and “none of the real flavor of a nineteenth-century hanging,” but it introduces a first, simple motive for wanting to execute: curiosity.

Other men were waiting there [in the Union headquarters] ... smoking, reading, playing cards and talking. The topic of conversation, for the most part, was the approaching execution of ... Miles Fuller. Rumor had it that Sheriff O’Rourke needed an executioner: a man to cut the rope at the hanging.

No one there seemed to want the job. ... One man said he wouldn’t do it for all the money in the world [and] that if he did, he knew he would never get another night’s sleep. I laughed at that. And then, suddenly, it put a thought in

“Electric Death Wears a Mask,” from the January 1928 *Startling Detective*, an unintelligible meditation on electrocutions by “author-historian and award-winning academic” Curtis Norris, conveys the prurient odium and garishness that have always surrounded the perception of executioners. “My good friends within these ivy walls are sheltered men and women, wise in theory and isolation, and far removed from the horrors of a blood-soaked room and the dismembered aberration of what was once a human being.” A more common shade of purple is found in “Man of Doom,” an account of Rich Owen, a “hard-as-nails” prison screw and former boxer, miner, and electrician who worked his way up to sergeant at the Oklahoma State Prison at McAlester. Owen designed the electric chair in the prison basement death chamber, then took charge of the death house in 1917, when the state’s traveling executioner showed up too drunk to pull the switch. He kept the job until 1941 when a “malignant disease began to burn inside him, gnawing away his vital organs. ... But even on his deathbed the old guard’s jaw still thrust forward pugnaciously. He died planning to leave his bed and perform the execution of Lewis Grayson, a Negro.” The article offers a second clue as to why anyone would want to kill for the state: Most modern executioners were hobbyists, men who came to the work largely because of their interest in machine physiology, electrical current, contemporary plumbing, etc.

For example: “I Help Them Die,” from the April 1937 issue of *Front Page Detective*, an admitted confession of George Philip Hanna, “Humanitarian Hangman” from Epworth, Illinois. Hanna was obsessed with nooses, gallows, hoods, and restraints as a teenager. He spent his days binding, masking, and hanging dummies and sandbags from the hayloft in the family barn, teaching himself the proper ratios of body weight to rope length: Too short a drop led to strangulation; too long, to decapitation. Hanna was “unexpectedly given the opportunity to show the world what [he] had learned” when, at age eighteen, he attended a hanging in a nearby county. Horrified by the sheriff’s bungling, he made his way through the crowd and walked to the foot of the gallows.

“Could I lend you a hand, sir?” he asked. “You’re doing this the wrong way.”

His perfect hanging that day became legend among sheriffs and wardens across the nation, and he carried on as a traveling hangman and execution adviser for forty years, touring the country with his ropes, handcuffs, and hoods, as well as a collection of weapons used by the murderers he’d hanged—the only compensation Hanna asked. He was a gentleman farmer, well off by all accounts. One story has him living in a hunting cabin in a northern Illinois virgin forest; another, in the January 1933 *Master Detective*, has him owning “2500 acres of the finest land in Southern Illinois.”

A jaundiced description of the executioner’s house, I notice, is always offered. The man in question may have been goonish, like Frank “The Human Butcher” Johnston, a miserable hangman who was eventually executed for horse thieving, or highly esteemed, like Robert Greene Elliot, “America’s Executioner,” whom we’ll meet below—but the dwelling must be dark, obscure, the locus of a pariah, where strange things are said and done. In “The Macabre Career of Henry the Hangman,” a cub reporter from the New Orleans *Item* tracks down the squalid quarters of state hangman Henry Meyer: “two rooms behind a vacant store . . .

sparsely furnished [with] an oil lamp, a table, a bench, and a walnut double bed. ... Meyer was lonely [and] did not want the reporter to go. He said: 'I had rather ride a street car than anything.' A neighbor accosts the reporter after he leaves: 'For Christ's sake, don't put it in the paper. People around here don't know he is the hangman. Everybody will move out if you put it in the paper.'"

Also invariably offered is the man's compensation. If the capital crime involved a theft, embezzlement, or some other scheme for money, the sum is compared to the executioner's fee—the implication, clearly, that both the condemned and his executioner are murderers looking for a payday. Most European nations had private, hereditary headsmen, but American hangmen tended to be law enforcement professionals who by force became amateur hangmen—future president Grover Cleveland hanged two men in the early 1870s, as sheriff of Erie County, New York. The early electrocutors and gas chamber operators, on the other hand, were civilian experts. Few states had their own, and traveling executioners were the norm.

"That paucity, mind you, is not for want of zeal," Espy says. He shows me a column filled in the May 1942 issue of *Special Detective*, regarding the thousands who applied for the job at Sing Sing after Robert Elliot died in 1940. This, despite the fact that Elliot's house had been firebombed in his second year on the job, and that the previous executioner, "a mild little man named John Hurlbert," had blown his brains out two years after retiring. Twenty percent of the applicants, the item notes, were women, many claiming electrical expertise; one wrote that she hated men, and "wouldn't mind bumping off a few in the electricity chair."

"This little item," Espy says, "shows how difficult it is to keep the facts straight." Elliot's predecessor was in fact named Hurlbert, his suicide came three years after his retirement, and he was hardly mild. Over the course of 140-plus electrocutions, which he performed in New York, New Jersey, and Massachusetts, Hurlbert became increasingly rancorous, a perfectionist, and secretive—"The Man Who Walks Alone," the newspapers called him. There is no known photograph of him. His suicide, performed in the basement of his Auburn, New York, house with a .38 revolver, owed more to the recent death of his wife than to any stress brought on by his job.

He was not, according to his successor Elliot, a particularly deft executioner. Elliot faulted Hurlbert's choice of voltages, which led to burning and "bodies hurtling out of the chair. . . I've never busted a strap," Elliot boasted. "My method is a rhythmic plan. I work the switch in and out and the current flows steadily, but quickly enough to paralyze the heart and brain instantly."

Elliot was a tall man with a long, Mannerist face and a large, eclectic wardrobe of bow ties, heavy wools, and wide-brimmed hats. In his dress he took after his mentor Edwin F. Davis, who designed the first electric chair, pulled the switch on William Kemmler, and trained both Elliot and Hurlbert. Born in a small New York farm town in 1874, Elliot was fascinated from childhood with electricity. From age sixteen, when Kemmler's execution dominated the newspapers, he had a ravenous curiosity about the electric chair. He wanted to know how it would feel to throw such a switch.

After graduating from school, he applied for a job as Davis's assistant at the Clinton Prison in Dannemora. Hired as an electrical apprentice, he soon became a death house protégé as well, assisting in some of the 250-plus executions Davis carried out before retiring. When the

executioner's job went to Hurlbert in 1914, Elliot retired from Dannemora and for twelve years took on electrical contract work. He got the job after Hurlbert, and within four years had become executioner for the Northeast (except Connecticut—the state still executed by hanging, which Elliot considered barbarous).

Like his famously humanitarian boss at Sing Sing, Warden Lewis Lawes, Elliot did not believe in the death penalty. He eventually assisted in killing or himself killed more than 500 men and women, but he felt executions were pointless. It pained him to see prisoners as they entered his various chambers, “eyes raw and blinking under the harsh lights” after months of the row. “[T]he swaggering tough guys whose jaunty poolroom bravado crumpled, who babbled and collapsed at the long ‘last mile’ ... the white-lipped frightened kids who took the wrong turns of the road and died with a half-finished prayer on their lips ... and the women. Five of them. ... It doesn't do any good. It never will.” He felt strongly, however, that the chair, particularly if run by an expert such as himself, was the way to do it. His motives for killing, if born of curiosity, were at least part altruism and part vanity. In both appearance and tone, he can be likened to another unwilling American mass killer, Robert Oppenheimer, saying, “I am become Death,” as he watched the first atomic bomb test.

In his second year on the job, Elliot's altruism was tested and his vanity enhanced when he traveled to Boston to execute Sacco and Vanzetti at midnight, August 23, 1927. Slipping out of the Charlestown prison a few hours later, he passed unnoticed through 800 policemen, the Boston fire department, and several thousand demonstrators waiting to follow the bodies to the funeral home for cremation. Though Elliot's sense of personal responsibility and power must have been enormous, he felt his was a guiltless hand. He had performed a specific technical action by which the public will, right or wrong, had been enacted. “You have done it through the laws you've passed,” he wrote in a memoir completed shortly before his death. “Judges and juries, people who have represented you.” Threatened countless times through hate mail, Elliot wrote that his only mortal terror was of having to sit one day on a jury that would bring in a death verdict.

“I know you've come down south to learn about executioners,” says Espy. “We had our traveling executioners, and they were a colorful lot. But historically, the long-standing executioners seemed to be up north. The national press paints us as being such cold-blooded killers, but it's just not accurate. A warden in North Carolina in the mid-thirties, I believe, committed suicide after electrocuting two black men. He couldn't deal with it. And a warden in Tennessee in the teens and twenties used to come out to address the crowd outside his prison on hanging days and make a big speech against the penalty. In Georgia, the governor took to commuting sentence so regularly they had to take that power out of his hands. I make the point not only out of pride as a southerner, but because large differences in the way executions are done—and they vary so much from region to region—are in themselves a strong argument against the death penalty.”

“Why?”

“Because it has to be *equally applied*. That was one of the challenges with *Furman*, the arbitrariness of the penalty, and part of the resolution with *Gregg*, though I don't believe *Gregg* offered any resolution at all, just a green light. But why do some states still fingerpri-

the deceased after his execution? And why do some give him a physical before he enters the death chamber? And fine, if you want to use diapers or a penile catheter or a rectal plug to stop a man soiling your gurney or your chair, I guess that's your business. But why do some states remove the catheter entirely while others just snap off the portion extending from the penis? Do you see what I'm getting at?"

"Not exactly."

"Well, we began by talking about Camus, the obligation to show the man's hand as he kills. You've got seventy, eighty percent of the population in favor of a penalty that to this day is carried out in the dead of night. Think about it. Intense public support for what is in essence a clandestine act. Why do they do it at that hour? And why cover their faces with their little veils and do it in subterranean chambers? Is it just an anachronism? I think they're a little ashamed of themselves. And I think it's just a bit fetishistic. In the Southwest, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, for example, there's a marked and very disturbing trend for young witnesses of executions to kill themselves just after highly publicized executions. I don't know how many cases I have where men take their teenage boys to a hanging and within two weeks these boys had either hanged themselves or some little friend. I have another clipping of a fifteen-year-old in Arizona who heard a vivid account of an asphyxiation, went out and slaughtered the first two migrant workers he could round up, then announced, 'I want to go to the gas chamber.' Being fifteen, of course, he didn't get his wish. And you can talk about deterrence all you want, but the studies show that homicides increase after publicized executions—and it doesn't matter if the condemned was popular, like Caryl Chessman, or a villain, like Ted Bundy."

He takes a pull of water. "Think about it. Eighty percent of the population in favor of something that may just be a fetish. You're talking about a deep rift in the national psyche. Because it shows there's something buried, like all fetishes, a memory or a wish or whatever it is that's too painful for the mind to deal with." He smiles. "But of course that's just my abolitionist opinion."

The Death Belt bears out Watt Espy's contention that "society actually kills best and most frequently when it knows most exactly what it's saying and doing." It is probably no coincidence that the states that kill most frequently are the most open about it. Though the last public hanging occurred in Kentucky (1939), Louisiana and Mississippi were the last states to institutionalize executions behind the closed walls of centralized prisons, and continued to conduct electrocutions that were open to the public, with some discretion, until the 1950s. Post-*Gregg*, the executioner's name is public record only in Mississippi, where it has been on file at the governor's office since 1938, and Alabama, where the Atmore warden has pulled the switch of the electric chair since it replaced the gallows in the 1920s.

Louisiana's twentieth-century traveling executioners, Henry "the Hangman" Meyer and the electrocutioner Gradys Jarrett, were well known to the public. The state's post-*Gregg* electrocutioner, who executed twenty men between 1983 and 1990, did work under a pseudonym, Sam Jones (the name of the governor who presided over the state's shift from hanging to electricity in 1939), but he became very much a public figure, and proud of it—so much so that he was fired when Louisiana switched to lethal injection in 1990. If Sam Jones

knew he was to be introduced to you at a party or picnic as the state executioner, he'd make his way unseen to the beer bucket, put his right hand in the icy water until it was cold, wipe it dry, then give a grim, hollow stare as he shook your hand.

Texas, by far the capital punishment leader in the post-Gregg era, does hide its executioner's identity, as does Florida, until recently the second-most-lethal state. Texas however, makes such show of its protocol and techniques that the executioner seems, as the saying goes, to be hiding in plain sight. On my first visit to Huntsville, I was told, on pretty good authority, that two men eating chicken-fried steak next to me in a downtown café had taken part in a lethal injection the night before. Death row has a Media Day, reporters are freely given tours of the death house, and each execution comes with regularly updated fact sheets, similar to the handouts in sports-events press rooms. They detail oddities, stats, and facts of the man's crime, his stay on death row, last meal, last words, and his execution.

Florida, on the other hand, takes the executioner's secrecy to such extremes it seems like a red herring. One of the last states to use a civilian executioner, the Sunshine State is also one of the last that hoods the man. Hired through classified ads, his name is known by only two people in the state, whose identities are also secret. At 5 A.M. on the morning of sentencing the executioner is picked up, hooded, at a designated spot by an administrative assistant of the Department of Corrections (DOC). The hood stays on for the drive to the prison farm at Starke, where the executioner is shown to a small room off the death chamber. He sits there until sunrise, when he's summoned to another small room called the "executioner's alcove" which is visible to the execution participants but not the witnesses.

"It is a strange sight indeed, that man sitting there in his hood," admits the Florida DOC's unusually jocular spokesman, Eugene Morris, whom I speak to several times in an attempt to interview the executioner. "Particularly in this day and age. Not to mention at six in the morning. It leaves you with no doubt, though: today's going to be different than yesterday."

I tell Morris I really want to meet this man. "No, sir," he says. "Not on this side of life."

"Can you tell me his name?"

"Sure I can," he laughs. "But then I'd have to kill you."

"Is it the same man each time?"

"Don't even bother asking."

"Does he look like something out of the past, in his hood?"

"Yes. I would say so. Very much."

"Does it seem a little fetishistic?"

He laughs again. "I'll have to get back to you on that one."

How strange this hooded man must look to the condemned, who in Florida has full view of his executioner before his head is pinioned to the chair, is captured in David von Drehle's account of John Spenkelink's final moments in *Among the Lowest of the Dead*:

In one swift motion Spenkelink was thrust into the chair and the practiced hands began moving over him, cinching the leather straps tight. "We came in and we strapped him into the chair and I remember John was looking all around the room, almost like he was curious," [Warden] Brierton recalled. "He turned his head and looked back at



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