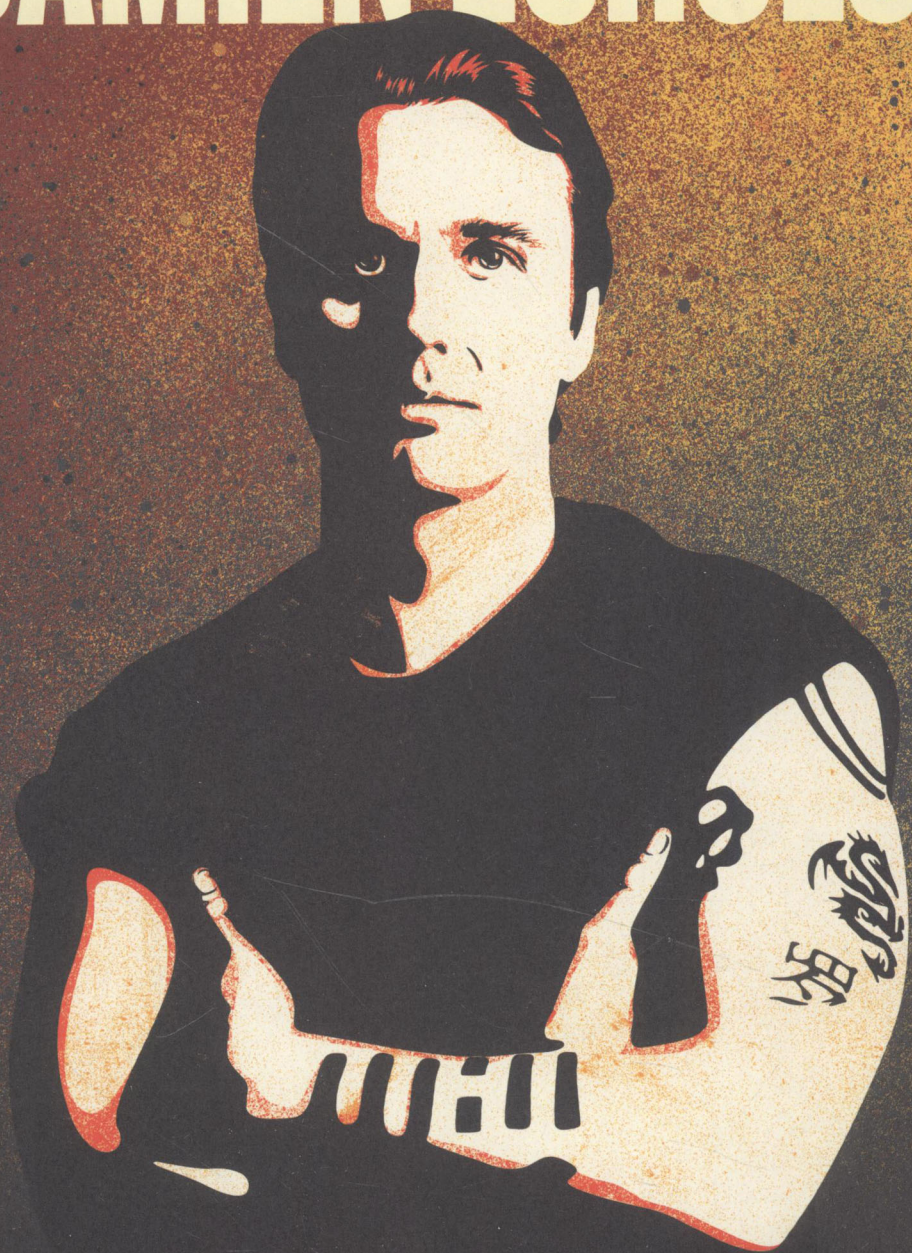


DAMIEN ECHOLS



LIFE AFTER DEATH

life
after
death

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*however, the story, the experiences, and the words
are the author's alone.*

life
after
death

also by damien echols

almost home

BLUE RIDER PRESS

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for Lorri

Silently I sit by
Watching men pace their cells
Like leopards

Biting their nails
With furrowed brows
The scene speaks for itself

—DAMIEN ECHOLS,
VARNER SUPER MAXIMUM
SECURITY UNIT,
GRADY, ARKANSAS

AUTHOR'S NOTE

What you're about to read is the result of many things I've written in the past twenty years, including parts of a short memoir self-published in 2005. I was sent to Death Row in 1994, and almost immediately I began keeping a journal. I didn't date most of my writings, it was simply too painful to look at days, months, years slipping past, the reality outside just beyond my reach. Many of the journals I kept are gone, stolen or destroyed when guards raided the barracks—anything personal or creative is a prime target in a shakedown. I've included as much as I could of what remained, and I hope the subject or context of these entries is helpful in placing some of them. Others don't need a time stamp. The conditions I have described in the prison system—the sadness, horror, and sheer absurdity that I've seen many human beings subjected to—will not have changed by the time you hold this book in your hands.

PREFACE

Saint Raymond Nonnatus, never was it known that anyone who implored your help or sought your intercession was left unaided. To you I come, before you I stand. Despise not my petitions, but in your mercy hear and answer me.”

Saint Raymond Nonnatus is one of my patron saints. I would be willing to bet that most people have no idea that he is the patron saint of those who have been falsely accused. I like to think that means I have a special place in his heart, because you can't get much more falsely accused than I have been. So me and old Raymond have struck a bargain. If he helps me out of this situation, then I will travel to all the world's biggest cathedrals and leave roses and chocolate at the feet of every one of his statues that I can find. You didn't know saints liked chocolate? Well then, that's one thing you've already learned, and we're just getting started!

I have three patron saints in all. You may be wondering who the other two are, and how a foul-mouthed sinner such as myself was

blessed with not one but three saints to watch over him. My second patron saint is Saint Dismas. He's the patron saint of prisoners. So far he's done his job and watched over me. I've got no complaints there. So, what deal do Saint Dismas and I have? Just that I do my part by going to Mass every week in the prison chapel, unless I have a damn good reason not to.

My third patron saint is one I've had reason to talk with many times in my life. Saint Jude, patron saint of desperate situations. I'd say being on Death Row for something I didn't do is pretty desperate. And what does Saint Jude get? He just likes to watch and see what ridiculous predicament I find myself in next.

If I start to believe that the things I write cannot stand on their own merit, then I will lay down my pen. I'm often plagued by thoughts that people will think of me only as either someone on Death Row or someone who used to be on Death Row. I grow dissatisfied when I think of people reading my words out of a morbid sense of curiosity. I want people to read what I write because it means something to them—either it makes them laugh, or it makes them remember things they've forgotten and that once meant something to them, or it simply touches them in some way. I don't want to be an oddity, a freak, or a curiosity. I don't want to be the car wreck that people slow down to gawk at.

If someone begins reading because they want to see life from a perspective different from their own, then I would be content. If someone reads because they want to know what life looks like from where I stand, then I will be happy. It's the ghouls that make me feel ill and uneasy—the ones who care nothing for me, but interest

themselves only in things like people who are on Death Row. Those people give off the air of circling vultures, and there's something unhealthy about them. They wallow in depression and their lives tend to follow a downward trend. Their spirits seem mostly dead, like larvae festering on summer-day roadkill. I want nothing to do with that energy. I want to create something of lasting beauty, not a grotesque freak show exhibit.

Writing these stories is also a catharsis for me. It's a purge. How could a man be subjected to the things I have been and not be haunted? You can't send a man to Vietnam and not expect him to have flashbacks, can you? This is the only means I have of clearing the trauma out of my psyche. There are no hundred-dollar-an-hour therapy sessions available for me. I have no need of Freud and his Oedipal theories; just give me a pen and paper.

I've witnessed things in this place that have made me laugh and things that have made me cry. The environment I live in is so warped that incidents that would become legends in the outside world are forgotten the next day. Things that would show up in newspaper headlines in the outside world are given no more than a passing glance behind these filthy walls. When I first arrived at the Tucker Maximum Security Unit located in Tucker, Arkansas, in 1994, it blew my mind. After being locked down for more than ten years, I've become "penitentiary old," and the sights no longer impress me as much. To add the preface of "penitentiary" to another word redefines it. "Penitentiary old" can mean anyone thirty or older. "Penitentiary rich" means a man who has a hundred dollars or more. In the outside world a thirty-year-old man with a hundred dollars

would be considered neither old nor rich—but in here it's a whole 'nother story.

The night I arrived on Death Row I was placed in a cell between the two most hateful old bastards on the face of the earth. One was named Jonas, the other was Albert. Both were in their late fifties and had seen better days physically. Jonas had one leg, Albert had one eye. Both were morbidly obese and had voices that sounded like they had been eating out of an ashtray. These two men hated each other beyond words, each wishing death upon the other.

I hadn't been here very long when the guy who sweeps the floor stopped to hand me a note. He was looking at me in a very odd way, as if he were going to say something but then changed his mind. I understood his behavior once I opened the note and began reading. It was signed "Lisa," and it detailed all the ways in which "she" would make me a wonderful girlfriend, including "her" sexual repertoire. This puzzled me, as I was incarcerated in an all-male facility and had seen no one who looked like they would answer to the name of Lisa. There was a small line at the bottom of the page that read, "P.S. Please send me a cigarette." I tossed the note in front of Albert's cell and said, "Read this and tell me if you know who it is." After less than a minute I heard a vicious explosion of cursing and swearing before Albert announced, "This is from that old whore, Jonas. That punk will do anything for a cigarette." Thus Lisa turned out to be an obese fifty-six-year-old man with one leg. I shuddered with revulsion.

It proved true that Jonas would indeed do anything for ciga-

rettes. He was absolutely broke, with no family or friends to send him money, so he had no choice but to perform tricks in order to feed his habits. He was severely deranged, and I believe he also liked the masochism it involved. For example, he once drank a sixteen-ounce bottle of urine for a single, hand-rolled cigarette. I'd be hard-pressed to say who suffered more—Jonas, or the people who had to listen to him gagging and retching as it went down. Another time he stood in the shower and inserted a chair leg into his anus as the entire barracks looked on. His reward was one cigarette. These weren't even name-brand cigarettes, but generic, hand-rolled tobacco that cost about a penny each.

As I've hinted, Jonas was none too stable in the psychological department. This is a man whose false teeth were painted fluorescent shades of pink and purple, and who crushed up the lead in colored pencils in order to make eye shadow. The one foot he had left was ragged and disgusting, with nails that looked like corn chips. One of his favorite activities was to simulate oral sex with a hot sauce bottle. He once sold his leg (the prosthetic one) to another inmate, then told the guards that the inmate had taken it from him by force. The inmate got revenge by putting rat poison in Jonas's coffee. The guards figured out something was wrong when Jonas was found vomiting blood. He was the single most reviled man on Death Row, hated and shunned by every other inmate. A veritable prince of the correctional system. You don't encounter many gentlemen in here, but Jonas stood out even in this environment.

I do not wish to leave you with the impression that Albert was a

gem, either. He was constantly scheming and scamming. He once wrote a letter to a talk show host, claiming that he would reveal where he had hidden other bodies if the host would pay him a thousand dollars. Being that he had already been sentenced to death in both Arkansas and Mississippi, he had nothing to lose. When he was finally executed, he left me his false teeth as a memento. He left someone else his glass eye.

For all the insanity that takes place inside the prison, it's still nothing compared with the things you see and hear in the yard. In 2003, all Arkansas Death Row inmates were moved to a new "Super Maximum Security" prison in Grady, Arkansas. There really is no yard here. You're taken, shackled of course, from your cell and walked through a narrow corridor. It leads to the "outside," where without once actually setting foot outside the prison walls, you're locked inside a tiny, filthy concrete stall, much like a miniature grain silo. There is one panel of mesh wire about two feet from the top of one wall that lets in the daylight, and you can tell the outdoors is beyond, but you can't actually see any of it. There's no interaction with other prisoners, and you're afraid to breathe too deeply for fear of catching a disease of some sort. I went out there one morning, and in my stall alone there were three dead and decaying pigeons, and more feces than you can shake a stick at. The smell reminds me of the lion house at the Memphis Zoo, which I would visit as a child. When you first enter you have to fight against your gag reflex. It's a filthy business, trying to get some exercise.

Before we moved here we had a real yard. You were actually out-

side, in the sun and air. You could walk around and talk to other people, and there were a couple of basketball hoops. Men sat around playing checkers, chess, dominoes, or doing push-ups. A few would huddle in corners smoking joints they bought from the guards.

I'd been there less than two weeks when one day on the yard my attention was drawn to another prisoner who had been dubbed "Cathead." This unsavory character had gained the name because that's exactly what he looked like. If you were to catch an old, stray tomcat and shave all the fur off its head you would be looking at the spitting image of this fellow. Cathead was sitting on the ground, soaking up the sun and chewing a blade of grass that dangled from the corner of his mouth. He was staring off into space as if absorbed in profound thought. I had been walking laps around the yard and taking in the scenery. As I passed Cathead for the millionth time he looked up at me (actually it was more like he was seeing some other place, but his head turned in my direction) and he asked, "You know how you keep five people from raping you?" I was caught off guard, as this was not a question I had ever much considered, or thought I'd ever be called upon to answer. I looked at this odd creature, waiting for the punch line to what I was hoping was a joke. He soon answered his own question: "Just tighten your ass cheeks and start biting." I was horrified. He was dead serious, and seemed to think he was passing on a bit of incredibly well-thought-out wisdom. The only things going through my mind were *What kind of hell have I been sent to? Is this what passes for conversation here?* I quickly went back to walking laps and left Cathead to his ponderings.

Prison is a freak show. Barnum and Bailey have no idea what they're missing out on. I will be your master of ceremonies on a guided tour of this small corner of hell. Prepare to be dazzled and baffled. If the hand is truly quicker than the eye, you'll never know what hit you. I know I didn't.