

side from Bobby's attorneys and family (and Bobby himself), I imagine I was the only person in that courtroom who didn't want to see him executed. Not because of anything at all to do with him. A career criminal, with a long history of violence, he had been acquitted of murder once before, and is thought (by police and investigators in the D.A.'s office) to have killed as many as six people before murdering Russell. I can't honestly say I care what becomes of him, and I can summon precious little sympathy for any suffering or hardship he is poised to encounter. But since I am opposed, on virtually every level, to the death penalty, I have had to fight deep unease about my own complicity in the proceedings.

This unease had been building, and I had been wrestling with it, for many months. My misgivings—and guilt—intensified each time we approached what we thought would be the beginning of the trial. I knew that I needed, passionately desired, to testify with a victim-impact statement if there should be a penalty phase. In a criminal case, where the prosecution does not represent the victim or the victim's family, but acts on behalf of the state, the victim-impact statement is a family member's only chance to testify. It would be my only opportunity to speak for myself, and for Russell, in my own words. I needed to go in front of a jury, in front of Bobby Hampton, and within the frustratingly narrow confines of what is admissible in Louisiana for such testimony, say whatever I could about who Russell was, who he was to me and what had been lost.

Yet the whole purpose of the penalty phase is to provide the jury with testimony that enables them to determine the appropriateness of life or

death for the murderer. The defense tries to humanize him and presents mitigating factors it hopes the jury will seize upon as reasons to issue a sentence of life imprisonment. The prosecution offers evidence of aggravating circumstances, such as the murderer's prior felony convictions and history of violence, but also tries to convey the impact of the loss on the victim's family, in an effort to embolden the jury to choose death.

To the degree that I spoke eloquently or movingly of my loss, or made vivid for the jury even a sliver of the brightness that was Russell, I would be helping them make a decision I find morally, politically, economically and spiritually insupportable. I was jammed into a miserable position. Either I kept silent in order to preserve the integrity of my beliefs, or I swallowed my discomfort and took the stand. If my bearing witness to my love for Russell brought another human being closer to death, then it felt like a terribly selfish thing to do. Even so, I could not surrender my chance to speak. My need to be a witness—to Russell's life, to his appalling absence from all these proceedings, to the lasting grief Bobby Lee Hampton had brought—that need drove me onto the stand, where I answered the few questions the judge permitted Hugo to ask.

I still struggle to reconcile my desire to testify with the regret I felt over the jury's ultimate decision, and the role my testimony played in helping them reach it. I resent that the death sentence necessarily keeps this whole ugliness alive for another decade. If Hampton were serving a life sentence with no eligibility for parole, he would get one appeal and that would be that—end of story. I could lay my head down every night, secure in knowing where Hampton

would be laying his for the rest of his life, and I could hope he was having a miserable time of it to boot. But with this sentence, it won't be over until he's been killed by the state. Which means that someday, around the year 2005, I will get a phone call from Louisiana. I will be told that all the avenues for Hampton's reprieve have proved dead ends. I will be given a date. And then, roughly ten years after the murder, all the pain will be dredged to the surface. No other event I can imagine could conjure as potent an alchemy of dread, confusion and renewed anguish as having to face the execution of Russell's murderer.

For the time being, distance and sheer denial keep it safely in the realm of the abstract and theoretical. When I am 40-something, it will come barreling into my life with very specific velocity and mass to careen around and wreak whatever havoc it will. I can't, of course, anticipate the depth or extent of the disturbance. But already I am furious at having to encounter it. I would just as soon be free to focus on making repairs to my damaged faith, on searching out whatever peace can be made with what was done to Russell—to all of us. It's proving to be grueling and unglamorous labor, and the long shadow cast by Hampton's imminent execution only encumbers the effort. So beyond my opposition to executions in general, I selfishly resent the intrusion of this particular one on my future and the troubling weight it hangs on my present.

It occurred to me, sitting in the courtroom that last day, having heard the sentence and watched Bobby attempting to infuse his brother and sisters with fortitude, that in an

odd way, he was at a new beginning. I could imagine him feeling sustained by a sense of purpose, which would be to overturn the decision that had just been made. I remember thinking, "He's got a lot of work to do." Mama, Cameron and JoAnn would all fly back to Cincinnati. I would fly home to New York. The family friends would go back to the various places from which they'd come, and Hugo and his team would plunge into the next trial. Bobby would, after a few days, be transported to the swampy isolation of Angola prison, keen, I would guess, not to put the trial behind him so much as to pick it apart for any possible flaw that might release him from his fate.

I had been warned, by families of other murder victims, not to expect too much from the trial whatever its outcome. The message had been: Don't expect closure. All of us had laughed, perhaps ruefully, at the media's passionate embrace of this concept, of their mantra-like repetition of the word as the wondered what the hell it could possibly mean. Maybe that's why we hear so little, overall, from the people murder leaves behind, at least compared to the glut of stories about the killers themselves. For the families, it's never really over. And that's a hard thing to be told, it's hard to take—especially if you want to believe that broken things can be fixed. (And isn't that most of us?)

Bobby Lee Hampton's trial and conviction, his sentence to death, did not bring closure. It brought, simply, an outcome. We finished our bit of business, we played our parts, all our anxious waiting for that phase to be over did come to an end. And still, Russell is dead. Nothing changes. ■