

Marc Anthony Richardson
Hell Could Be Subjective

Mother, my warrant will be signed. But you can save me. You can save me from myself. For though I cannot imagine you will save me, your daughter, I still must imagine it. For the injection chamber, I imagine, like some disaster sites, will smell of sex in spite of the forest-scented disinfectants. An attorney told me this once, at a bar; she was very distraught: on the face of her legal adversary, that very day, she had witnessed the news of a posthumous acquittal for a man who had been put down for a house that had been burned down, bony bodies in the rubble; but when she was first investigating the scene she had smelled the faint scent of sex—and it would be this same scent outside the injection chamber on the other side of that glass, suffusing the witness room: You should imagine your death, the man had said, there is nothing more beautiful, said this while strapped down to a table that had been partly angled upward by a button, forty-five degrees at the waist, as if he were lying in an adjustable hospital bed, talking to visitors, said this not to the families of the victims or to the deputy director or the director of the prisons, but to this prosecutor in the bar with me, reciting his last words of sobriety through her joyless inebriety, this condemned woman confiding her compunction to a could-be condemned woman unaware for when a warrant is signed a set comes to your cell, Mother, a counselor or a chaplain is chosen, and then the warden comes with his guards to ask you to please stand for a formal reading, you are given a new change of clothes, you go from orange to yellow and too soon to white as some maturing insect—from affliction to fear to shock—white when you are to be transformed into the final flying thing—for your status must always be known—there is the fear of filling out forms, of where oh where to ship your belongings and body when the greatest common grave of man is his mind and you'll be disremembered anyway?—or perhaps ashes sent with pieces of teeth to an attorney?—most proxies are women, for most women are proxies for men, my lover having been the exception—for they once measured him for a moment for a suit, the guards, said either participate or be beaten, and I might've even said to them or to one of them as he said, for my lover and I are one, that you can get into my head, sir, but that would mean you are out of yours, and then they would beat us anyway, beat us

then and before then, beat us at the behest of their boss, the warden, who had had our ankles bound and our wrists shackled to a waist belt and then brought before him to his big beautiful office, at night, after everyone else left the building, as if he were Lucifer himself showing Jesus the sights from a summit, with a fiery arm around him, promising him some temporary amenity if he would only believe in this duality—for the Devil is the belief in duality—but then he had them beat us—for my lover and I are one—right in front of him for doing a series of interviews—for there is this curtain of secrecy inside and we had so rudely drawn it back a little—we were being brutalized while being brutally conflicted for after being and only being in another building for so awfully long, after the fresh air we felt on our face, after that short van ride to the warden’s building and seeing the vastness of the parking lot and the sky—indeed the sky, the stars, with no damn chain-link ceiling between us, as it is over our communal stall outside for our one hour a day, six days a week—after seeing the glorious cleanliness of the administrative halls and the vending machines and the plants and the elevator and the big beautiful office, we were now being beaten upon a carpet, something you would only see in a cinema so outrageous and surreal and simply for a few little interviews, to publicize our plight, which had brought bad publicity to the prison, and then after being beaten we were sent to solitary for our ribs and wounds to heal and seal in shadow and gown and sheet, only to be returned to our cell thirty days later with much of our belongings liberated, lifted, confiscated, our headphoned radio, our literary leisure, our magazines, our journals, our lover’s long letters—so that we would remain in the now and only the now and never be undone. . . . Yet now you and I are one, Mother, your daughter and you. Our conscience makes it so. Just as you and your son will be one. But I am the lesser of your evils and being the head of an empire you must use the greater evil for the greater good, for the sake of the family legacy. And since our warrant is signed now, yours and mine, Mother—no more delays from the backlog or from the unavailability of medicines, or even from that ethical contest over the initiative itself—since there will be no years or decades of waiting for an appeal to impede it, our having waived the right, time has slowly brought us here within a year. But now time accelerates once your warrant is signed; if there is no reprieve from the governor, not even at the last minute, our sentence must be and will be administered. Since the backlog has been eliminated, since

the medicines have been attained from an unnamed source under the new secrecy statute, since the ethical contest over the initiative is at a standstill, still, decidedly moot, we will soon be given a last change of clothes, having gone from orange to yellow, soon we will go from yellow to white, from fear to shock, we will be placed inside another cell under a suicide watch, a week out from administration: this ruinous intravenous feeding, this low-tech lynching, will transform medicalized murder into a form of therapy; it will pervert the instruments of healing and mask the most despicable act a society can ever inflict upon its citizen with an antiseptic veneer—and since there are no actual pharmaceuticals specifically designed for human euthanasia, every time this intravenous feeding is used, it is truly a fatal experiment: the use of well-known pharmaceuticals and medical equipment will blur the line between patient and prisoner, healing and killing, illness and sickness, therapy and punishment—which makes the administration all the more menacing. But now we are clothed in white, Mother, a week out from this, as we sit in this ten-foot-high cell that is partially glassed in, the bathroom facilities included; two opposite walls are concrete, while the other two are fashioned from five-foot-high unbreakable glass, with only two and a half feet of concrete coming down from the ceiling and up from the floor—as if the cell itself is the injection chamber, the bed the injection table, as if one glass panel were the one-way mirror concealing the administrator from the spectators, who are all sitting beyond that other opposing panel. Everyone is always watching us. We are not to be alone. We are unable to masturbate or to go to the bathroom. Our hair is too long, so we ask for our head to be shaved and in the mirror, with our back straight and our breasts scarcely defined, our frame lean and truculent, our eyelids pulled narrow at the corners by crow's-feet, the bones of our pyramidal cheeks, the square jaw and the jet-black buzz cut peppered with salt—like a Buddhist nun's—we look quite handsome. Our possessions have all been bequeathed to our soon-to-be survivors, and only our writing implements remain, a spiritual book. Visitors have been given greater access to us. A phone is in our cell. The guards are so nice. . . . On the day of administration, severely anxious, a guard comes to wake us at dawn, but we are already awake—night is the best counsel. We are finally to be transformed at noonday today. The clement call has not come, the pardon, yet the governor still has until the last minute. We have already acquiesced though. We are ready. We are allowed a

last meal and shower and this, too, is glassed in, but when the eyes are closed and the mind is open this water cascades from a cliff, from a hot spring, as our skin glistens in the sun and we are clean and given a second chance for a final meal—having refused the first offer—anything we want from a nearby truck stop; we ask for tea and no sugar: we don't have the stomach for anything that won't come out the other end; everyone else though, all the prisoners on the row and off, will have fried chicken for lunch: a tradition since the launch of the electric chair, for over a hundred years. We are to be transferred to the other building now, the final building, and a female orderly is present when they enter this semi-glass cell, giant muscular men in military gear, an intimidation tactic; they shackle us tight, our ankles and wrists cuffed and tethered to a waist belt, and in addition to our orange winter coat we are given a ski cap and some mittens, though our thermals are very thin; the walk is only from the execution unit to the death house next door, but it is arctic out, below zero—yet it is still the freshest and freest air we have breathed ever since we arrived here, early last spring: fresh snowflakes are falling, tiny descending skeletons of snow accumulate on a phalanx outside, many more men in military gear with machine guns here to make sure we are laid to rest without rescue, while beyond the gates are likely a line of news vans and vanguards and a vigil of abolitionists, barricaded in clothes, bundled like beggars for life or sitting inside their vehicles. The death house is freezing. It is only used for this purpose—yet someone should've had the forethought to heat it. They let us keep our winterwear until it's warm inside the cell, next to the injection chamber, a cell which is five-feet wide and eight-feet long; we spend our last three hours here, talking to our advisor, our Buddhist mother nun, who has long since begun to love us like a daughter—we would weep over our prayer beads if we were allowed any. No phone calls. No visits today. Our visitors have all been heard and seen outside that semi-glass cell yesterday. It is warm now. Our advisor is asked to step out for a moment, so we can undress, so that our arms and our legs and our groin can be shaved, for swift venous access—yet this is nothing new to a woman or to anyone who has so readily acquiesced: we could be on a gynecological visit for all we care, with this female orderly in here, if it weren't for those muscular guards outside; the strap-down team awaits. Eventually we dress again, minus the winterwear, so that our advisor can reenter. The administration has been rehearsed, over and over again, and though this calculated protocol is always experimental in nature, it is

still perceived to be a skillful praxis of painlessness. The administrator, medically untrained, has been drilled to administer the medicines through a set of mechanical syringes fitted by a qualified medic, or a doctor—despite the Hippocratic oath—who will also enter the chamber after the first shot to make a consciousness check and then leave and later return with another qualified medic or doctor, after the third shot, to confirm the cessation of all vital functions. There are, in fact, two administrators, as well as two sets of syringes; several intravenous lines travel from within the administrative room through a hole in the wall to a stand inside the chamber, where they await attachment to two separate needles, which are then fed into two swollen veins, respectively produced by a single tourniquet: one needle is a backup, one person is an impostor, but both are posing as the impostor because neither wants to be the administrator, for as in the past, when only one of the two switches jolted the electric chair, it is essentially the same: one person has a set of dummy drugs, leading into a dummy bag, while the other has the set of genuine drugs—and neither knows who is holding the switch; they can both say that they didn't do it, or they can both regret that they did, for three hundred dollars in cash, for a procedure that should only take ten minutes—but could last for two hours. . . . It is time. We must go on alone. Our Buddhist mother nun says to us: Look on him. He will be sending the love. As will I. And then she kisses our tears, each side of our face, before leaving our cell. Hers is the last loving touch we will ever know, for now we are feeling a room full of people who are afraid to touch us. Yet have to. So that now with small, restricted steps and chains and a military mission of four, between giant muscular men, we walk next door. The doorway to the chamber has an ovality to it, and aside from the vents and the hole in the wall the chamber is an airtight tank made of metal, a gas chamber that was built after the electric chair so that when we step through and over the bottom rim of this final awful egg we begin to feel faint and fall toward a guard who has stepped through in front of us as another one steps in after us, both holding us up with the other two remaining outside; the director of the state prisons is here; he speaks to us softly, for already we are coming around, telling us to breathe, to just breathe, the air is coming in through the vents. His voice sounds so hollow. It is a small chamber, only four people can fit, and everything is equally aqua and ugly—as if we are in some sort of submersible, Mother, feeling the merciless sting of our mercy. Our heart is drumming against the breastbone.

Our throat is dry. Our acquiescence has left us. Breathe deeply, the director says, here, lie down. We ask for a sip of water. Lie down first, he says, very warmly, and we do. The table is like an operating table with extended armrests and black straps and three sectional cushions: the outline of a body with its arms splayed out, and with their noticeable holes; the tank is octagonal, so that the table is facing a three-paned window that must look into the witness room, for those semi-circular curtains are closed, and above the table is the one-way mirror; both windows are unbreakable. The strap-down team are three of the four guards, so the director has to step out of the chamber so that the third guard can come in; the fourth stays outside with him. Lie down, says a guard—or does he? We say we already have, and then he tells us to relax, to just relax, and then gives a questioning look to one of the other two—who just looks at him very dimly, as if to calmly remind him that we might be out of our wits. We are the only woman in here, for that female orderly is gone. The men are all white and muscular and each of them has a part of their skinny little yellow woman to strap down now; they uncuff our wrists and ankles, slide away the waist belt, and the chains clunk and resound against the tank floor only so that our wrists and ankles can be bound once more, our shoulders and legs, our forehead. Two of the guards leave, one stays, the one who spoke to us; the doctor or the medic comes in, tells us to relax and inserts the needles, very clinically cold—and we are rolling along only because none of our veins were rolling; yet if they were, rolling in the arms, there is always the back of the hands and the top of the feet, the legs and the groin. Since our head is strapped into place, since we cannot see much but the ceiling and the upper part of the walls, we figure that these intravenous lines have been threaded through the holes in the armrests, but it was the use of those alcohol swabs—prior to the insertion of the needles now taped below the hollows of our elbows—that was really ironic: perhaps those swabs were hedges against the possibility of a last-minute pardon—for after all this, we should not have to suffer the silliness of an infection. Now the doctor or the medic and the guard leave together. Only we and the director are left. There is a clock in here that doesn't even tick. We ask for that sip, and a guard brings us a cold cup of water with a small flexi-straw, bent at an acute angle—for we are horizontal still—holds it for us for several seconds, and then leaves the cup on the stand before sealing the door behind him; air is coming in through the vents. Breathe deeply, the director says, his voice sounding so

hollow—for he is feeling claustrophobic; we can see it on his face. He looks at the clock. He looks at the clock. It smells of nothing in here. Seven minutes have passed. There is a ringing and its ripple—and only now are we aware that there's a phone in here: Yes, the director says, listens, and then yeses again. The governor has spoken. And these yeses must've sounded so tinny on the other end to him. The director hangs up and then picks up the phone again to push a button, looking into the one-way mirror: We've been given a go. Wait for my signal. And his voice must sound so tinny on the other end to them. The microphone is turned on. The table is angled upward at the waist, at forty-five degrees, so that we can now see—you and I—the curtains electronically opening. . . . Our lover's face is the first face we see—we see him almost instantly—a shining serpent is in his face, his face a weeping stone! Our Buddhist mother nun is sitting beside him, calmly weeping as well. Two rows of chairs are arranged in a double semi-circle since the tank is octagonal, with our beloveds in the front row and to the left of us. The lover is so radiant! He is so open that the love just pours all over us! He is a water main—massive in diameter—reaching down from the snowcap of a great glorious mountain, feeding us here in the vale, in the shadow of the valley of the forest, where we are oh so grateful and glad and only realizing now—you and I—that this has all been written before, that we've been put to sleep before, a few times before, even shot heroin once after the death of our son so that now so that now we would rather be anesthetized and paralyzed and then neutralized by potassium chloride, or some cousin to it, than be murdered by any other means. Inside the witness room our two beloveds and the entire rear row, the family attorney and the three journalists and the three volunteer witnesses, are all looking toward the other five viewers in the front—as these five faces show their wretchedness to me! For you are no longer with me, Mother. For these five faces are not the five faces of the family of the victim—none of them are here—they are the five faces of my family. The family of the victim are not permitted to attend, for this event could be too difficult for them; besides, despite their despair, they have already made their grueling contribution to this belief, to the feasibility of holy reform, by allowing this in the Lamb's name, so that now so that now it is time for the family of the offender and the offender himself to somewhat reciprocate—for this may be his first edifying phase, for he most certainly must witness this, for if he did not attend, eventually, this sentence would be administered to him, as well,

for he is still on parole until after all of this is over. So you are holding his hand now, Mother, sitting beside your son, who is right in front of me in the front row, sweating. It is the first time I have seen your faces since the substitution last spring, early last spring, and now your hair is fully white. His almost is. He is shrinking to your size, small and mortified, and his eyes are holding your fears, his back rigid in his chair—but he is shaking so horribly that he is like a pole weakly anchored in a whirlwind. He wants to look away, but knows he cannot; he would be sentenced to several years for it; the deputy director stands by the door to make sure, with two of those muscular guards to either side of him now, and there is video surveillance. He hasn't slept in a while, your son, his eyes red and swollen, but he's afraid to close them—the nightmare is real. Do you remember, Mother, do you remember what you said to me at my son's funeral, at that gravesite without a body in it, beside my father's? When a parent dies, you said, the past is gone. But when a child dies, the future is. And then, over a year later, you had another reason to wonder if this family is cursed, and I am looking at you closely now, not critically, for I am feeling compassion for your confusion: I have finally found you a body for that site. The three journalists are now flitting their eyes from me to you repeatedly, feverishly jotting down their impressions on their pads, as if they are sensing the truth from us; but everyone knows that I freely offered myself for this, for the sake of this viable reform, so that now I am looking at a long-forgotten aunt, separating my brother from my lover by sitting between the two—as if she now knows what you have always known but never said anything about, never even acknowledged: the ruin of my youth—and there are two more long-forgotten relatives, sitting on the other side of you. The three volunteer witnesses, the three upstanding citizens most likely solicited and rounded up from the Rotary Club by the director himself, are all sitting stoically, each face a blank space the journalists will fill in later as they deem fit—but the face of the attorney is so sorrowful that it won't need any vivid embellishment: he could not have imagined this. Seven witnesses in the front row and seven witnesses in the rear. If this were a traditional execution, if the faces of my family were the faces of the family of the victim, there would be a buffet awaiting everyone afterward—including the prosecution and the execution teams—it is part of the budget. A cooler would sit in a corner, for executions only, and the entire atmosphere would seem like a small social gathering, a picnic indoors, with that low-tech-lynched body

still warm and down the corridor. Yet when the state kills it is forced to write homicide on the official forms, in the space after cause of death, for the word execution is ambiguous, merely meaning the carrying out of an executive order. Homicide tells the truth. Even if the word legal precedes it. A hand touches me. Very lightly. As if it's afraid to touch me. Inside the witness room, standing at the door with the guards, the deputy director adopts an alert look—his eyes are on me—and only now do I respond with a look toward the director of the state prisons, who has just touched me, who has been calling my name, using the honorific title for addressing a single woman—for he's been speaking all along and I've been vaguely aware, taking everything in, for he's since finished greeting and informing everyone in attendance that my brother has been sentenced to die, by proxy, for the murder of a woman whom I've never met, and he would now like to give me a moment to make a final statement. He calls my name again, asking if I heard him, and I ask for another sip. He brings me the cup, and then the water brightens my belly. I look toward the lover. I look toward the lover. He is weeping. He is radiant! Hold me open, I say. Hold me open, my love, and my voice must sound so tinny on the other end to him. The director of the state prisons then, in a quivering voice, says that the governor has given him the sanction to proceed, and with that he turns toward the mirror, raises a hand, and then lowers it. . . . The administration is a three-drug procedure. A strong anesthetic is administered first, pentobarbital, which is utilized to euthanize animals. A flush of saline solution follows to hasten the flow—for flushes will follow all of the shots—but my heart rate has already dropped; I have fallen almost instantly. The doctor or the medic comes in wearing a surgical mask and a head scarf to conceal himself and shakes and shakes my shoulder, calling for me twice, using the honorific title for addressing a single woman—though I am a married woman without my lover's surname or without my wedding ring, for it was forfeited last evening. The doctor or the medic pronounces me unresponsive and exits the chamber, sealing the door; the consciousness check is complete. The second chemical is administered, the paralytic, the vecuronium bromide, which surgeons use to paralyze the muscles of a patient, giving them the appearance of peace, a mask of tranquility—but it is given to me in such a high dose that it stops the lungs and diaphragm. But not the heart. Had that notorious sedative been used instead of the pentobarbital, that midazolam—which the state had used on seven men in seven days, the

expiration date of the drug itself having set the dates for the seven executions— then perhaps I would be feeling a horrible sensation right now, an inferno of flame and of drowning in my own fluid, for that midazolam would've been ineffective in blocking the effects of the vecuronium bromide—and perhaps my pain would be witnessed now as gasping and choking and flinching, amidst the rise and fall of my stomach. But since now I am completely paralyzed, no one would know that this cruel and unusual punishment could be happening to me anyway, even with the pentobarbital; my body is unable to show even the slightest possibility of a drowning and burning sensation, no histrionics here, for this mask could be concealing a nightmare. No one can tell. My hell could be subjective. And as it once was when I was a girl, after a night hag sat on my chest, I could be helpless and horrified right now, still sensate, watching the door to my dark room open to admit a dark figure, who soon looms over the foot of my bed with an upraised axe—and as this potassium chloride is injected into the dreamer, to halt the heart, this greater burn could be that axe hitting home. The director coughs. The door is unsealed. The doctor or the medic comes in, checks the eyes, checks the heart, and then another doctor or medic comes in to confirm, using the same stethoscope. I am pronounced dead. The time is recorded. The microphone is turned off. The curtains are closed.