



Capital Punishment

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“Capital Punishment” consists of fifty-eight mostly two-line stanzas, punctuated six times with the same parenthetical, single-line comment by the cook: “(I am not a witness).” The cook thus periodically refuses the status of witness yet is clearly a sympathetic observer. As the cook prepares a simple dinner of a baked potato, salad, and glass of water, he wants desperately to make the last meal memorable and appetizing to the unnamed Indian on death row. The ethnic identity of the cook is unknown, but he is sympathetic to the inordinate percentage of minorities on death row. Such political commentary and inference from crime statistics imply a critique of capital punishment, the title of the poem, which becomes clearer as the poem continues.

The cook admits to tasting the food of the condemned prisoner before serving it, as a means to humanize and essentially to share the last meal of this condemned human. As the cook proceeds to imagine the “wispy flames decorating” the prisoner in the process of electrocution, the justification of a society that legally kills people is called into question. The cook glumly admits: “I turn off the kitchen lights/ and sit alone in the dark/ because the whole damn prison dims/ when the chair is switched on.” By turning off the lights and not noticing the power surge during the moments of electrocution, he is able only temporarily to forget the lethal justice that is being meted out elsewhere in the building.

Finally, without considering at all the crime or the circumstances of the crime, the cook reduces his quandary to simple mathematics: “1 death + 1 death = 2 deaths,” and seems to say that state-sanctioned death, whatever seeming justice may be sought, ultimately results in a second death, a second ending of life, a new and more horrible set of disappointments and endings without continuation.

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