GOD BLESS THIS RODEO

Louisiana prison inmates illustrate a warden's Bible lessons
By Daniel Bergner

In a farm shed at Angola, Louisiana's state penitentiary, Johnny Brooks leapt into a saddle that rested chest-high on a wooden rack. For an instant he was frozen above the leather, legs spread in perfect symmetry and spine impeccably upright.

Then gravity reasserted itself. He came down, sat in the saddle. And because we were, that September of 1996, in a maximum-security prison, because Brooks had been there for eighteen years and was sentenced to remain there until he died—he beat a woman to death during a robbery—and because 85 percent of Angola's 5,000 inmates were serving similar sentences for robbery with violence, murder, or rape, there seemed an exceptional amount of gravity in the shed. But relative to that palpable weight, Brooks, even now that he'd descended into the saddle, still defied the force of nature. His gaze, usually lowered, was direct; his muscled shoulders, usually hunched, were held back. His speech came quickly, with authority, no longer limited to the "Yassuhs" he delivered to his bosses on the prison farm's range crew, utterances that had made me feel I was with a caricature, a shuffling black servant, a latter-day Stepin Fetchit.

Brooks had been given leave to demonstrate the techniques he would use the next month in the penitentiary's inmate rodeo. He talked about spurring action and the centrifugal force created by a spinning bull. He talked about the public that filled the prison stadium every year for this event; he said they might root for the convicts to be hurt by the animals but that they cheered loudly for the best performances. And he recalled the day a rodeo clown—hired from the pro rodeo circuit to lure the bulls away from fallen riders—hugged him, lifted him off his feet in congratulations, after a beautifully executed ride. "He liked what I done," Brooks remembered, his eyes at odds with the understatement of his words.

The next time I saw him, a month later at the rodeo, Brooks was sprinting across the ring, heading for the fence, spine arched and legs pumping like a cartoon character in a life-or-death escape, a bull's horns inches from his back. It was the rodeo's opening day, and he had signed up for Convict Poker, a contest devised by the prison staff: four inmates sat, as if playing cards, at a small, red table in the middle of the ring; the mounted M.C. (like the clowns, hired from the pro tour) bellowed, "Brrrrrring on the dealer!"; an 1,800-pound bull, jolted by an electric prod, was sent toward the table; the last man sitting would win a prize of one hundred dollars.

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Daniel Bergner is the author of Moments of Favor, a novel, and God of the Rodeo: The Search for Hope, Faith, and a Six-Second Ride in Louisiana's Angola Prison, to be published by Crown this fall. He lives in New York City.
But the animal was uninterested in stationary targets. So one of the clowns, usually figures of protection, flagged his hat behind the convicts’ shoulders, then climbed up on the table and waved his arms in the air. Still the animal didn’t charge. The inmates waited motionless, palms flat and fingers spread on the tabletop, never turning to check on the bull as it circled behind their backs, knowing that if the three-minute whistle blew with more than one man left, the one who had moved least, whose fingers hadn’t so much as twitched, would win. The clown flung a folding metal chair, vacated by the only inmate eliminated so far, into the bull’s snout. The chairclattered against the horns. The men did not shift. And now the black bull hurtled forward to deliver on the promise of those sweeping white horns, which slammed, by one convict’s pure good fortune, into the back of his folding chair instead of his kidney. The man was driven to the ground and avoided being stomped only because the animal was distracted by another movement: Johnny Brooks’s desperate, cartoonish flight.

This, Angola’s rodeo, was billed as the Wildest Show in the South. A thirty-two-year-old tradition that year, it was held every Sunday in October. I had seen it once as a spectator a decade before. It had never left my mind. What allure, I wanted to know, did such perversity hold for the convicts who volunteered to take part? And when I did finally return, in the fall of 1996, to answer that question, I found myself surrounded by paradoxes. I was to spend much of the next year at Angola, my need to understand those mysteries now taking the form of a book. Only at the very end, as the rodeo of 1997 began, did I recognize that paradoxes sometimes veil straightforward truths that we would rather not acknowledge.

The first Rodeo Sunday of 1996 was drizzly and cold, but three thousand fans had driven far—Angola isn’t near anything—and arrived hours early to be sure of getting in. They had been drawn by the amusement section of the local paper, which promised the sight of inexperienced inmate riders thrown “every which way.” Asked if they carried any weapons or drugs or alcohol, the fans had been waved onto the prison’s vast grounds, pointed toward the old, wooden arena that stands within the chain-link and concertina wire of the main yard. Outside the stadium, they’d bought hot dogs and Angola rodeo T-shirts (prisoner in old-fashioned striped jumpsuit clinging to bucking bull) from the convicts. For a dollar they’d been locked inside a free-standing jail cell and had an inmate snap a Polaroid through the bars. A pair of wooden bodies, painted with striped jumpers and a ball and chain on each ankle, had been provided for the same purpose: stick your head up from a cutout neck and get your picture taken this way too.

As spectators claimed places on the bleachers, the mounted inmate drill squad galloped in patterns through the ring. They carried flags: the country’s, the state’s, the penitentiary’s, and, in this prison whose population is 77 percent black, the Confederacy’s. (Yes, a black man carried one of those blue Xs with the thirteen stars.) The banners waved above their bowed heads as the national anthem played. Then, from an Angola chaplain: “God bless this rodeo.”

And with that, the mounted M.C. introduced the six riders in the first event. “Waiting in Department of Corrections bucking chute number one, serving life... Waiting in Department of Corrections bucking chute number two, serving life.” The word meant exactly that—sentences without parole. “LLLLLIFE... LLLLLLIFE!”

The six convicts on six wild bulls were released into the ring at once. This was the Bust Out, a special feature of Angola’s rodeo. The name referred to escape; the event was designed for futility. The men sailed; they spilled sideways. Last year’s all-around champion was trampled across the back by another man’s bull and left unable to continue in the competition. (He was lucky to hobble away. One past rider is a quadriplegic due to a similar injury.) The competitors were, as publicized, largely untrained. They ranged from those who had no riding experience whatsoever, let alone with bucking livestock, to those, like Brooks, who had skills they’d developed on the prison farm and in many past Angola rodeos. But not even this second group of riders got any practice during the year on bucking broncos or bulls. So although professional rodeo is a dangerous sport, the rate of injury here was particularly high, especially as the inmates were not given the protective vests the pros wear to save themselves from shattered ribs and punctured lungs. Each year broken shoulders or wrists or ribs occurred daily, and in a slapstick event named Buddy Pick-up one would-be cowboy died of a heart attack. In the same event, when I’d come as a spectator, I’d seen a man’s head connect at

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1 As recently as the late 1960s at the rodeo, after the playing of “The Star-Spangled Banner,” the M.C. would ask everyone to remain standing as the inmate band began, “Well, I wish I was in the land of cotton...” An old black inmate, dressed in a Confederate soldier’s gray uniform and cap, would climb onto a wooden platform painted with the Confederate flag and tap-dance for the crowd.
full gallop with a metal post. He'd been shackled and shipped off to a hospital in Baton Rouge, where his forehead was rebuilt with a steel plate.

Yet the inmates begged to ride. On that first Sunday, as soon as the previous year's champion was injured, convicts yelled down to the guard over the chutes: "Sarge, let me get his bronco...."

The rodeo involved money; one hundred dollars for sitting longest at the poker table while the bull charged, fifty dollars for winning a riding event. The ticket sales went to the Inmate Welfare Fund, which helped pay for everything the state wouldn't, from recreation equipment to the inmate-run magazine, The Angolite. But as I talked with the participants, the prize money seemed at most a secondary motivation; and the Welfare Fund, no motivation at all. "Most of Angola's inmates suffer from attention deficit disorder," one convict, among the few who objected to the rodeo, had told me, by way of explaining the men's willingness to be launched in the air and broken as long as they were noticed. "And whenever someone's paid attention to them, it's been to beat them up in one way or the other."

The day's finale was yet another inmate-rodeo special, the Guts & Glory. A chip worth one hundred dollars was strung between a bull's horns. Thirty inmates poured into the ring on foot, then tried to pluck the chip without being stomped or gored. I had seen so few moments of glory on that dank afternoon. In the traditional riding events, almost all the men—Johnny Brooks included—had been hurled instantly. And now my eyes were on Terry Hawkins, here for murdering his employer at a slaughterhouse, hacking his head with a meat axe in an argument that had exploded over a demand that he work late on his stepdaughter's birthday. Terry planned to use his own well-tested strategy to grab the Guts & Glory chip: taunt the bull into charging, run away in an arc tighter than the bull's turning radius, and reach back behind his own shoulder to snag the prize. Other inmates had told me, "Terry's learnt the know-how. Watch him."

Terry had seemed, when we first met, scarcely more than a teenager, though I knew he was in his mid-thirties. Tall, athletic, restless, with a nervous bravado, he appeared as naive and confident as the star of any high school team. His past victories in the Guts & Glory were the best accomplishments of his life, he said. I asked if that included the years before Angola. It did. I asked if he could imagine anything better in the future. He said no. He showed me his cot, where he had written BULLFIGHTER across the sheet and pillowcase. "I'm going to look for you in the stands," he'd told me. "I'm going to toss you that chip when I get it." So, however uneasily, I had fantasized myself a part of his triumph, a part of something that would be—however briefly, however sadly—wonderful.

An immense brown bull charged into the ring. Terry, wearing his good-luck red wristbands, waited at the far end. He studied the animal's moves. Then he stepped forward, or rather the other men edged back. He feinted, froze, stood petrified five feet from the horns, lunged again, lured the bull, sprinted away. He reached behind. He was

**Photograph by James Hamilton**

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struck by the muzzle, caught between the horns, tossed ten or twelve feet into the air. He landed again between the horns, was vaulted and flipped onto his back, came down once more on the animal's forehead, was spun upward yet again, the preservation of his body, his life, utterly beyond his own control; finally he slid off the muzzle and collapsed to the ground.

No one got the chip. It still dangled between those horns, while for me, at the close of that first Sunday, something else hung in the air over the grandstands, in the air trapped over all Angola. The weight I had felt in the farm shed was made of more, I understood, than the crimes these raped, at best they had put guns to other people's heads. Here was original sin, the loss of God's spirit in the garden, Cain's murderous need, his expulsion from the world he knew to the world we now know. And here, as in some vestigial and distorted Passion, these men, sin's representatives, had arrived at the place where they would offer up their bodies for purging. For their own absolution, and everyone else's. Add to this the prospect of glory—the chance for the rides Johnny Brooks dreamed of, or for a chip in Terry Hawkins's hand—and the expiation became sweet.

So I found myself, that fall, seeing the rodeo participants as engaged in religious trials, and, ridiculous as it may sound, I found myself searching for signs. I was no fanatic, no nascent born-again. I was an unobservant Jew. But at the Wildest Show in the South, I sensed the possibility of God's grace.

Warden Burl Cain called himself a fisher of men. Back in September, when I was first led into his office to meet him, he leaned forward at the head of his conference table and said, "So you want to talk about the barbarism of the rodeo." His comment came even before hello. I liked him immediately for his candor. He acknowledged that barbarism was a factor.

But we talked, first, about other things. A Southern Baptist, he spoke of the Gospels' message of absolute forgiveness. Fingers interlaced solemnly on the table's dark wood, he said he would not read the criminal records of his convicts, that men could, over time, be rehabilitated, that when lifers had served twenty years they should be considered for parole. His colorful tie lay draped around his shoulders and down his expansive belly like a minister's stole. "We cannot warehouse human beings," he declared, a soft hoarseness in his southern accent. He sound ed resolute against the society around him, a state and a nation that saw the reclamation of violent criminals as a mission for fools. And I knew from one of Louisiana's capital defense attorneys, Clive Stafford-Smith, that on the prison's death row, where the condemned doze endlessly hours in lockdown, Cain had insisted on offering literacy classes and contact visits. Whatever his unrevealed position on the death penalty, he refused to dehumanize the men who awaited it.

He proclaimed his job a calling, and often I felt he was an unlikely savior to his inmates. Yet he possessed qualities that gave me pause, made me wonder whether he saw his inmates as human beings at all or merely as subjects to confirm his lordship. Before the start of the 1995 rodeo, his first as warden of Angola, Cain, a short man in his mid-fifties, his white hair swept elegantly back, had entered the arena in the closest thing he could find to a chariot, a lacquered cart pulled by
his inmate-tended team of Percheron horses. The next October, he would be more discreet at the stadium but would tell a group of reporters, his expression bordering on glee, about an event he planned to add in 1997: a number of inmates would walk out into the ring, each carrying a cup of flour; they would spread the flour in a circle around their feet; a bull would be released; the winner would be the last man inside his circle of flour. And during our long first meeting, after all of his talk of the Gospels, Cain showed me a pamphlet he treasured called Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun. "Leaders must provide direction to their Huns," he read aloud.

"All people aren't leaders of men," he noted.

And maybe, I thought, a personality given to great excesses, to brandishing his power over other lives, was necessary to lift his convicts up from a bottom everyone else believed was too deep to touch. Because their sentences held no promise of parole, the inmates had, theoretically, nothing to lose. They had no reason to change. And Cain meant to bear them up not only by way of religion but by all ways of creating constructive lives. The aim itself seemed a minor miracle.

I knew that he meant for me to think so. I had been told that Cain hungered for flattering publicity. And when I brought up my memory of the Confederate flag from years earlier, he said he had not recall the banner flying since he had taken over, and that I wouldn't see it at the stadium in October. "We'll just have the American and the Louisiana flags," he said, eager to please. "Isn't that the way to be?" The issue, apparently, slipped his mind. Later he would tell me, "There are only two races at Angola, blue and gray"—blue being the color of the guards' uniforms; gray, that of the sweatshirts many inmates wore during autumn. Yet blue was as overwhelmingly white as gray was black, and the administration couldn't have been more pale. Still, I had seen Cain on national television looking so compassionate on matters of criminal justice, especially on his agony over the death penalty, that his shortcomings and manipulations were far outweighed by his urge to deliver his message of redemption.

As to the rodeo, it both was a simple good time, full of "funny things," and, in one of his many discourses, a complex cake. The public had to be drawn in. "And so there's all the ingredients in it," he explained, leaning forward over those solemn hands. "Some of the ingredients by themselves wouldn't be fit to eat. But you put them all together, you have a nice cake... I didn't come to the rodeo for about eight years, because I saw a bull step on the back of an inmate, made him quadriplegic. And that grieved me greatly, and I would not come back. I don't want to see the inmates hurt. I don't want to see the blood and I don't want to see the guts... But the rodeo puts $50,000 in the Inmate Welfare Fund. And rodeo times are good for morale, for the riders, for everyone involved."

I was reassured by his grief. I wanted to believe.

In Angola's rodeo, two events, the bronco riding and the bull riding, closely resemble those of the pro tour. And on the third Sunday, with the sky a limitless blue and five thousand fans jammed onto the bleachers, the M.C. announced, "Ladies and gentlemen, Johnny Brooks, serving in prison, is waiting in that Department of Corrections bucking chute saying, 'Let me ride this bull for six seconds of my sentence.'"

Six seconds—lowered from the professional eight—was the time a rider needed to stay on his animal to earn a score for the precision of his form. Brooks wore a black felt cowboy hat and a vest and chaps of black and turquoise suede, made by a convict in the hobby shop and paid for with the money his sister occasionally sent him. He had imagined, he'd said, scores in the eighties and nineties. But he dreamed of nothing now, aware only of the bull beneath him in the chute, its slack, rolling hide and, beneath that, the muscles rippling along its back. Another inmate cinched the thick bull rope tight across Brooks's hand. The animal jostled, rattled the walls of the chute, drove Brooks's knees hard against the slats. "Ready?" the inmate manning the gate called. A minimal nod. The gate was yanked open, the inmate crying, "Outside!" And so Brooks was: outside, his awareness of Angola obliterated by a reflexive terror. The days and months and years of anticipation, of watching the pros on TV, of going over in his mind at night the habits of the most difficult bulls he'd drawn in the past, including the one that knocked him unconscious last year—all those hours fed his reactions, and the animal could not rid Johnny Brooks from his back. He kept his chest out and his free arm, perpendicular at the elbow, cutting the air in classic rodeo style for balance and points from the judges. When the six-second whistle blew he was still in full control. For several seconds longer he worked his free arm with immaculate form to show that he could do this forever, to prove to everyone that he was that good.

After Brooks jumped clear of the bull the spectators applauded, but not loudly. He waved his hat and walked back across the arena, surrounded by fading approval.

The next man up, Carey Lasseigne, had promised to win an all-around championship belt buckle for his son's approaching seventeenth

INMATES, IN FOR LIFE, HAD NO REASON TO CHANGE. CAIN MEANT TO BEAR THEM UP
birthday. The boy had been three years old when Lasseigne began serving his life sentence for killing a gas-station attendant, shooting him in the back of the head while he pled for his life, during a robbery while Lasseigne was high on angel dust. Lasseigne’s wife watched from the stands. She was all but unique for sticking with him and for visiting him frequently at Angola; only 20 percent of the inmates receive any visitors at all. His son was not there. He refused to see his father more than twice a year. Lasseigne wanted to give him that buckle to prove he was more than what the boy had been told—was still told—in their town. During Lasseigne’s first attempt several years earlier, the bull had slammed him repeatedly against one of the wooden gates; he had received 142 stitches to his scalp and later gone into a seizure on the shower floor.

Now Lasseigne settled himself onto the bull’s loose hide. “Ready? . . . Outside!” Convulsing, the bull lunged forward twice and hooked left. It rose off its hind legs and whipped the rider’s forehead into its own skull. Lasseigne crumpled and slid to the ground, unconscious. The clowns rushed to lure the bull from the ring. An emergency medical team hurried out to immobilize Lasseigne’s neck and belt him to a stretcher.

If any cheering followed this injury, it was inaudible. A very few in the crowd were laughing. A very few had gasped. Most seemed bewildered. The rodeo’s gladiatorial possibilities having come to pass, they didn’t know how to react. And when the M.C. announced that Lasseigne had regained consciousness, and that he’d love to hear their appreciation as he was carried off, they didn’t know how to react to this either, offering a scattered, confused clapping.

Another rider was sent into the ring as soon as Lasseigne was cleared away. “Sixty-two years old!” the M.C. cried, as the inmate, clutching the bull rope with two hands, qualified for points before being catapulted and landing on his head. “Ladies and gentlemen, that man is sixty-two years old!” Again, uncertain applause.

And perhaps, I thought, it was in this uncertainty, as much as in the triumphant control of Johnny Brooks’s ride or the longing of Carey Lasseigne’s, that there was a hint of something redemptive. The crowd might have headed off that morning to a place where the natural desire to see a man demolished could be indulged guiltlessly, or, at the very least, to an isolated territory to gaze upon an isolated species—convicts—but as soon as they passed through the penitentiary’s gate, before they even entered the arena, as soon as they bought a hot dog or T-shirt from one of the prisoners, a confusion of intimacy had begun to set in.

I had watched them get their pictures taken in that cartoon jail cell—young couples, fathers and sons, a toddler coaxed to grip the bars. The inmate who worked the Polaroid camera was raising money for the Angola Sober Group. Unable to ignore the mockery that seemed obvious, I couldn’t quite manage to be subtle as I questioned him. “No, it’s not that way,” he answered, with what might have been a twelve-step graduate’s rigid obliviousness, or else a prisoner’s perspective that made my objection an unimaginable luxury. “This is my chance to have a little contact with the free people. I’m not an inmate for today. Today I’m free.” A few minutes later, two women smiled uneasily behind the bars. “You remember us from last year?” one of them asked him. And the other said, “Yeah, you used to hug him, Charlene.” Holding her half-developed photo between two fingers, Charlene wrapped her arms momentarily around his neck.

“Camp C!” the guards yelled. “Main Yard!” “Camp D!” The third Rodeo Sunday was over, and quickly the men were called to the old, blue, mesh-windowed school buses that would take them back to their compounds. Terry Hawkins, who had been kept so brutally airborne by the bull two weeks before, accepted congratulations from other inmates. Today he’d taken one hard knock-down by the bull but snatched the Guts & Glory chip in the process. “Way to go, Terry . . . You done good, Terry.” He smiled in cleansed exhaustion, his chest still heaving, though the contest had ended ten minutes before.

The fenced, cinderblock compound Terry rode to stands in a setting that could be called lovely. Angola’s grounds, larger than Manhattan, have no perimeter fence at all, only a rushing bend of the Mississippi on three sides and the Tunica hills, thickly wooded (and thick with snakes), on the fourth. More than two thousand cattle and two hundred horses graze the fields. Herons and pelicans fish beneath the cypress trees that rise from a sweeping lake the Mississippi left behind in some other age.

But the grounds hold remnants of Angola’s brutal history. Well-preserved within the placid landscape crouches a cement building known as the Red Hats. The disciplinary cases once sent there wore red-tipped straw hats to identify them in the fields, and were packed, as recently as the 1970s, sometimes ten to a one-man cell. The cotton fields are reminders of a more distant history: the thirty-year period after the Civil War when a Confederate major leased the state’s convicts, bought a plantation (the prison’s name
comes from the African home of the slaves who once labored there), and worked to death or otherwise killed off his inmates in an average of six years; and the era following, when the state decided it could turn a better profit by abolishing convict leasing and working the inmates directly. By 1951 conditions had become so harsh, and supervision, by armed inmate guards, so arbitrary and severe, that thirty-seven convicts sliced through their own Achilles tendons with razor blades rather than go out to cut sugarcane. In the 1960s, before the passage of life without parole, inmate guards were offered a reduction in sentence for every escaping convict they shot.

Not until the 1970s did the prison begin to change. A federal judge found that conditions at Angola "shocked the conscience" and breached the Eighth Amendment's guarantee against cruel and unusual punishment. Prisoners had taken to sleeping with mail-order catalogues taped to their chests and backs to protect themselves against one another. The state, having at last abolished inmate guards, provided little protection. Between 1972 and 1975, forty inmates were killed by other convicts, and 350 were stabbed. The judge placed the penitentiary under federal court order, mandating the firing of hundreds of additional guards.

Now well secured, the inmates don't have much to savor in their long lives. They sleep in cinderblock dorms of sixty-four men. Beneath each cot, with its inch-thick mattress, are two locked metal trunks, about 24 inches long and 18 inches wide, holding all the possessions each man is allowed. The cots stand three feet apart. The noise of industrial fans (to lessen the risk of tuberculosis), of the partitionless, industrial toilets (utterly exposed, the men squat in public), and of a single, shared TV blaring above the fans and the flushing is constant and difficult to talk over. The fluorescent lights, too, are constant, lowered only to a security-level blue after ten at night. The men sleep with their white sheets pulled over their faces in an attempt to obliterate everything. The shrouded bodies seem to belong in a morgue.

In the morning most are led out to pick cotton, okra, soybeans, and corn, or to cut weeds from fence lines. Mounted, armed guards watch the inmates from above, and other officers, "pushers," stand among each crew to be sure the rows are picked clean. The majority of convicts earn a salary of four cents per hour. The prices in the prison commissary are about the same as on a supermarket's shelves.

For those who live with few infractions, there is the chance at jobs as orderlies, as groundkeepers, as cooks. The few who can avoid trouble year after year may become librarians or part of the range crew. For some, the most desirable assignment is to the dog team. This group works and sleeps at its own unguarded and unfenced out-

JOHNNY BROOKS STANDS WITH DRILL-TEAM HORSE
the state, and on the rodeo. Although I doubted the sincerity of his convictions, I did not show it. As I have said, I wanted to believe. And I don't think Cain for a moment questioned my complete faith in him. He sensed the kinds of miracles I

longed for. He seemed confident that he could provide them. But neither of us yet knew how he would press me, wield his power directly at me, nor how I would, in return, press him.

Outside the stadium on the final Sunday, an inmate group called the Toy Shop displayed a hand-carved, wooden ride-around airplane and sold soft drinks to raise money. The plane was painted a gleaming red with yellow racing stripes and was replete with a perfectly rendered propeller. The group would donate 2,500 wooden toys at Christmas to the Louisiana School for the Deaf and to Toys for Tots. No, my heart was not quite bleaching for these charitably devoted murderers, rapists, and armed robbers. And when I left the prison and read in court transcripts the details of the crimes committed by the men I had come to know, when I imagined, say, the husband who discovered his wife's body after Johnny Brooks's murder, there were times when imprisonment seemed the least these men deserved. But then I was with them again—men who had been in Angola fifteen, twenty, twenty-five, thirty years—and my heart, though not bleeding, folded in upon itself.

The last session of the rodeo began. It had rained most of the week, and the ring was a swamp. Under an emerging sun, bronco riders were hurled and sent up explosions of mud; steer wrestlers were dragged through pools of slop. At the end of the day, after all the slapstick, a line formed in front of the EMS truck. Many of the injured had put off treatment until the rodeo was over so that they could remain in the stadium and take part in the next event, and the next, under the gaze of the free people. One man's shoulder had been broken in a contest called Wild-Cow Milking. A bull had stepped on its fallen rider, snapping his ribs. The next day, he would find himself coughing blood. In the Guts & Glory, Terry Hawkins had been driven into a somersault by the bull's horns, jumped up, given chase again, and at last hustled for the fence, climbing the rails, where the horns jabbed at his thighs. One convict had been rammed in the legs and, unable to stand or even drag himself away, had lain in the mud while the horns sliced and pocketed at his shins. He had been carried off, leg broken in several places, only after the whistle had blown to end the event and thereby conclude that year's rodeo, the chip remaining unclaimed.

But these things, too, had happened: Coming back after being knocked unconscious a week earlier, Carey Lasseigne had won the runner-up buckle—shiny, with brass beading—in the all-around. He could send his son that birthday present. And Johnny Brooks had drawn his toughest bull of that October, one that churned in the tightest circles while thrashing and hurling itself into the air. Mind useless with fear, body owned by reflex, Brooks was excellent and helpless, free. This was his best ride. He rose four or five times with the animal; when it came down, wrenching, his body snapped and keeled but held out against the spin. The animal contortion that put him on the ground was too fast to see. Five seconds—not six—had gone by. He would receive no score. The rodeo, for him, was over. But there was, in the crowd's diffuse clapping, a measure of tentative approval, the most fleeting welcome back into the world.

Following the rodeo that fall and early winter, I felt that the world I had seen was held in inexpressible balance, that there was—to be embarrassingly blunt about a sense that is fundamentally so private and so flimsy—something that might be called God at Angola. At the same time, I was uneasy with my desire to believe in a less homespun but equally soothing version of Cain's "nice cake." I had found a publisher who would finance what was becoming my obsession, my need to know whether Angola was, as Cain insisted, a "positive prison." I spent much of 1997 at the penitentiary, with the inmates of the range crew, the Toy Shop, the CPR team, a Toastmasters public-speaking club; I spent my year among "Tower Freaks" who masturbated to any sighting of long hair up in the maroon-and-
yellow towers, where many of the female guards are stationed; among men in the punishment cells who tried to saw off their own feet with razor blades or who smeared their own bodies with feces; I spent it with an inmate who tended to a man paralyzed from the neck down in a prison football game, this unofficial convict nurse who shaved the man and massaged his face with lotion and gently cleaned the crusted mucus from his nostrils in the Angola infirmary; and I spent my year with Warden Cain, who spoke of the single mothers so many of the convicts had been raised by, who said of himself, "I am their daddy," who declared himself a "prophet," who spoke of making society understand that his inmates didn't have "horns and a fork and a tail"; the leader to whom Johnny Brooks had given his runner-up buckle in 1995, saying, "I just want you to have this," the leader many of the convicts had seen, when he first arrived, as someone who recognized that they were men.

But Warden Cain grew worried—about me. He picked up on signs that I would not depict a flawless prison. In February, he was scheduled to take part in a death-penalty symposium at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and invited me there to talk through his uneasiness about what I intended to write and to discuss his desire that we draw up an agreement allowing him to edit my book for any "inaccuracies." We would talk things out before the symposium, he said. All I needed to do was put him in his "comfort zone." But in his room at a local bed-and-breakfast we discussed nothing remotely editorial, and our relationship began to turn in a much tighter circle.

He had, during an earlier meeting at Angola, become enamored with my publisher's advance. (The fact that I had revealed the sum when he asked still makes me wince, yet I wanted him to feel that my project was serious: the advance represented a sizable portion of his salary.) Now, sitting in a chair much too small for him and speaking over the mound of his belly, he said almost introspectively that his parents had been small-town people, simple people, not poor but definitely not well off, and that he hoped to retire more comfortably than they had. He said his wife needed a barn for her dressage horses. He said it would cost $50,000 to build. He asked how much I could contribute.

The warden made it clear that my continued access to the prison depended on my contribution, and in case I'd forgotten what an interesting subject matter I had for my book, what a valuable commodity he controlled, he reminded me, "I've got a good thing there." He had another rodeo coming up next year. He had the inmate clubs, the Toastmasters, and the CPR. He had Angola's history, all of its drama. "And I've got another execution coming up in April," Cain said, "and that's good, too." After I stalled, saying that maybe we could work something out, and wondering whether I could possibly bend such payment to squeeze past a journalist's basic code against paying for stories (for I, surely, was no saint, and was at least as panicked about my book as I should have been outraged by Cain's use of the prison and its inmates in attempted extortion), we drove together to the symposium. There Cain spoke of the terrible emotional burden of being the man who, by state law, stood in the death chamber and gave the signal for the lethal injection, of the religious dilemma he agonized over, of the fact that at his last execution, as the convict lay strapped to the gurney and the technician struggled to find a vein, he had held the condemned man's hand.

I was amazed by Cain's behavior but not surprised by it. I'd developed enough misgivings over the months of exposure to his autocratic style, and I knew—though I had long tried to ignore it—that there had been implications, always difficult to prove, that Cain had tried to profit from his inmates. As I had read in the Baton Rouge Advocate, Cain, not long after taking over Angola, had met, through a local friend he'd done business with before, an entrepreneur named Charles Sullivan. Soon Sullivan set up a can-relabeling plant at the prison. About fifty inmates scrubbed the rust off of outdated cans of tomato paste and evaporated milk, bought indirectly from Nestlé, then pasted on new labels: VERONICA for the paste and POT-O'-GOLD for the milk. In return for the labor and the facility, Sullivan paid the state a total of $220 per shift. Even accounting for the possible slothfulness of the inmates and shifts that were never quite eight hours, his cost came to well under one dollar per man-hour. He would then resell the cans in less than prime markets—state agencies and third-world countries.

The plant had barely started operation when an inmate counselor wrote the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to inquire about the legality of both the resalvaging itself and the practice of paying inmates four cents an hour for work done on behalf of a private company. The letter wound up with Louisiana's own health officials, who slipped up, revealing their inmate source to Angola's administration. Right away the warden transferred the convict from his trusty job to a spot in the field lines, and from his quiet, trusty dorm to a more dangerous section of the prison known as the Wild Side. It was too late, though, to save the operation. Cans were confis-
cated as unsafe and the enterprise was shut down. There was no telling how profitable the business would have been, whether it would have matched the chicken-deboning plant that Cain had established as warden of Dixon Correctional Institute, a smaller Louisiana state prison. There, the man who'd introduced Cain to Sullivan was reported, after a legislative auditor's investigation, to have saved $3.3 million in labor and other expenses over the course of one thirteen-month period, and to have paid the state only $113,300. But profit, according to Cain, had never been his own motive. He had received no kickbacks. He had merely wanted to create work for inmates without jobs, because "idleness is the devil's workshop."

What fascinated me was not how readily open accusations and hints of corruption emerged as I grew inspired by my own situation and read and asked around about Cain's past; what struck me was that his troubles always faded away. Nothing harmed him. Articles appeared in The Advocate, legislative inquiries were made by the House Committee on the Administration of Criminal Justice, and Federal District Court Judge Frank Polozola, who retains supervisory oversight of Angola, held hearings, but ultimately nothing ever happened to Warden Cain. Partly this may have been because his brother was a long-entrenched state senator and because Cain has long-time connections to Edwin Edwards, governor of Louisiana until 1996. Partly it may have been because he had maneuvered himself into a position where he not only ran Angola but was effectively in charge of the state's Department of Corrections. But fundamentally, I thought, it was because so few people wanted to focus on anything to do with prisoners. The convicts were gone, and it was easier not to think about anything related to them. Take that part of society and lock it away; keep that world separate; let the rest of us forget.

Cain's demand of me, so brazen, reflected his sense of invulnerability. Moreover, he knew he had me where he wanted me. The press entered Angola at his discretion, and of reporters who'd offended him in one way or another, I'd heard him say, "I put his name at the gate. He won't ever be back here again." He had, in effect, the legal authority. The United States Supreme Court, in a series of decisions going back to Pell v. Procunier in 1974, had helped to ensure that the nation's prisons stayed isolated and unknown, that criminals, once sent away, could be ignored. They had to be kept without physical cruelty—on that the court was firm—but beyond that their lives would be dismissed. Law-abiding citizens wouldn't have to think about them.2

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o why had Cain agreed to let me wander around Angola in the first place? Because he felt confident of glowing coverage. Perhaps mindful of being barred should they want to return to Angola to do another prison story, perhaps persuaded by the warden's gospel-infused proclamations, four national television networks—ABC, PBS, A&E, and the Discovery Channel—had or would soon run programs featuring Warden Cain as a sensitive voice on penology, a hero to anyone who believed in the fundamental humanity of violent criminals.

At the end of our Amherst evening, I asked Cain if I could visit the prison during Easter week at the end of March. I had tried to let the talk of money drift. Cain replied, "Let's get this deal worked out first." But, stalling, I got him to agree to the visit. When I arrived, Cain appeared to have some reservations about the request that I pay him for access. He both backed away from his earlier demand and asked me repeatedly how much I would offer him in the hypothetical event that we reached a financial agreement. This March conversation was one of nance and insinuation and more delay; I remained focused on maintaining my rare long-term access to a maximum-security prison. Apparently worrying that he had left himself far too exposed, on March 27 Cain presented me with an editorial agreement.

2 This was not, of course, the explicit rationale behind the 1974 ruling in Pell, which set precedent against the media when it comes to entering prisons. The rationale was that the press had no First Amendment right to go anywhere that the public couldn't go. A journalist's right to express what he wished was protected by the Constitution; his ability to gather information was not. When a California state prison forbade reporters from interviewing specific inmates, the Supreme Court backed the state: the reporters weren't on the inmate's prison-approved visiting lists. That the reporters weren't legal counsel, family or spiritual advisers, or friends deemed by the warden to be rehabilitative—and therefore, by prison regulations, couldn't be placed on the visiting lists—was judged irrelevant. The prison was merely forcing a uniform set of standards on the public, and the reporters didn't meet those standards.

The result of this and later decisions was that wardens allow the press into their territory only when and with whatever controls they wish—briefly and with staff escorts—and that the country understands very little about the lives of 1.7 million of its citizens. Writing in Pell that the Constitution does not force "upon government the affirmative duty to make available to journalists sources of information not available to members of the public generally," the Court failed to acknowledge that most government officials feel that duty anyway, as a matter of survival. They need to retain the public's attention and its trust, and so they offer a great deal of information. What they try to hide, other officials, also fighting for survival, help to expose. But with prisons the public doesn't want to pay attention; it has already handed over its trust.
that effectively granted him approval over all that I wrote. When I refused to sign it, he had me escorted off the grounds permanently (or until I changed my mind and signed), assuring me, “I love you like a brother, but this is just business.”

And why did the warden settle the matter with me on June 3, within five days of my lawyers’ filing a lawsuit for restored access? It was not because my chances of regaining broad access by way of a civil trial were particularly good (the federal judge assigned to the case told my lawyers what they already knew, that no matter how egregious the actions of the warden, legal precedent would make it extremely difficult for the judge to restore the latitude I’d once had). It was because, it seemed clear, he didn’t want the publicity that would come with a trial and my testimony about the attempted shakedown. Through the writs my lawyers filed with the court, which included a description of the Amherst meeting, there was, in the Louisiana newspapers, some coverage anyway. But no prosecutor’s office ever so much as called me, and the issue evaporated quickly. In June I returned to Angola, having been given five more months of visits, with unmonitored interviews and court protection for the inmates against reprisal for speaking with me. Cain had an interval of panic during which he begged me to exonerate him. He claimed he hadn’t known that the book was about inmates and asked me to issue a statement affirming his innocence: “I’m not talking about you doing the legal thing, I’m talking about the human thing. Would you do that for me? … It’s taking a toll on the prison. … You really ought to do it for the sake of the inmates. ‘Cause I’m trying to run a Christian Walk and this don’t look good for that.” But when I declined he simply avoided me and went on as he always had, governing his forgotten kingdom.

Cain continues to maintain that he believed my book was to be about him, rather than about the prison and its inmates, and that if he had known the book’s true subject, he would never have asked me for money. Moreover, Cain says, my allegations against him were merely tricks by “the big boy up north” to leverage renewed access to the prison.

By the time I returned to Angola, the inmates, though amused by my battle and pleased by Cain’s defeat, certainly weren’t surprised by anything he did. They had watched him reintroduce mule- and horse-drawn wagons to the vast farming operation of Angola for the first time since the 1950s. The wagons joined and partly replaced tractors and trucks in the transporting of vegetables picked by the line crews. From the spring through the fall of last year, if you stared out across the cropland into the heat haze, you saw the ramshackle wagons inching up the rows, driven by an inmate perched high in the sun. “He likes it to look like slavery times,” the inmates observed.

The introduction of the wagons, I soon learned, was only one in a series of changes that suggested Warden Cain was remaking the culture of the prison into one more openly degrading. He expanded the prison’s shoe-shining detail. Shoe shiner had always been a semi-official inmate position at Angola, but the bootblacks, provided for
magazine's accomplishments in much esteem. He shut off the phone line the writers had always used to gather information outside the prison. Given Cain's business dealings and my interaction with him, it made good sense that he would remind the writers who was in charge and whose virtue their articles should never question. But Cain had difficulty with more than the prospect of critical reporting. He had trouble with the stature of Rideau himself, with the way he was treated, by some in the outside world, as someone worthy of respect and even honor. In January the Louisiana State Bar Association notified Cain that it was giving its Excellence in Legal Journalism prize to a film on the death penalty Rideau had written. It would have been accepted procedure to let Rideau attend the awards dinner (a previous warden had sent him with an escort to be honored at two press conventions in Washington, D.C.), but Cain told Rideau nothing about the prize, sent his first deputy to the banquet, and kept the plaque in his office.

The warden's final flourish during my year at Angola came with the approach of another rodeo. He imposed on the riders the requirement that they wear shirts of thick, coarse cloth, with black-and-white stripes two inches wide—replicas of the old-fashioned convict uniform. Stripes hadn't been worn at Angola since the reforms following the heel slashings of 1951. But, calling the previous year's main rodeo participants to a meeting, Cain told them of his vision, what an improvement he thought it would be, how well the riders would stand out. "But we're not going to force y'all to wear them. We're going to put it to a vote. How many of y'all want to wear those uniforms? Raise your hands." Almost every man did.

With those uniforms, Warden Cain helped to substantiate and gratify one of our deepest longings: that murderers and rapists and armed robbers be not at all like us, that they be all but inhuman. He helped push the inmates off the end of the earth. They were, as he presented them, crazy and stupid and living lives without meaning, and therefore willing to climb onto bulls and broncos they had no business riding, to sit at a table and wait for a bull to charge at their backs, to try to grab a chip from between a bull's horns.

So, in those weeks, when one pudgy inmate, in stripes, landed on his head and lay unconscious on the dirt, motionless but for one quivering leg; when another, in stripes, landed on his butt and was operated on for a broken vertebra; when Johnny Brooks broke his hand and competed in a cast and accumulated enough points to be announced, in stripes, Angola's All-Around Cowboy; when another convict, in stripes, was kicked above the eye and knocked out and came back two weeks later to be run over by a bull and have his ankle and foot broken; Warden Cain leaned down from the judge's booth and told the inmates they'd put on such a good show that he was going to sweeten the action by adding an extra hundred dollars to the Guts & Glory chip. And Terry Hawkins, in stripes, went out to grab it. He wanted it for all kinds of reasons beyond the money, reasons as complex as human beings are unknowable. High among his dreams was the hope that Warden Cain might see what he was willing to do, and would promote him to the range crew. (He was, presently, among the newly appointed shoe shiners.) During that month, one bull had raced over him, its hoof cutting his cheek and grazing his throat. Another had sent him into an airborne cartwheel. Now he found himself too close to the fence. Later he would tell me he knew he was too close, that if he didn't flee he would be isolated and trapped, with nothing to distract the animal once it came for him. He stayed. He held the fence with one hand, thinking maybe he could force himself between the steel cords, escape that way. With his other hand he reached out toward the bull. It charged.

Swinging low with its horns, the huge animal struck Terry behind the thighs, upending him and flinging him into the air. His body spun on every axis. He gyrated and wound up falling with his belly facing the ground. It was almost the equal of the previous year's flight, but it didn't last as long. The bull didn't launch him over and over. Terry came down on a horn.

But in that moment, maybe there was a discoverable God who, as many of the inmates believed, had a reason for all of this, this rodeo and the prison, even Warden Cain himself. Maybe He was saving Terry for something. The point of the bull's horn met with the center of Terry's chest, but he bounced off, the wind knocked out of him, and was left, after a week's healing, with only a bruise to the bone and a ragged silver-dollar-sized scab over his yearning, mortal heart.