

Fearing evil

By [Sarah K. Fisher](#)

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It's March of this year. We stand, a circle of strangers, in an open field on a prison compound, not far from the execution chamber. A picnic table is the strangely ordinary centerpiece of this gathering, covered with candles and surrounded by people telling stories of hope and redemption.

As far as we know, this is Kelly Gissendaner's last night on earth. We are here to pray her through it.

One of Kelly's friends launches in: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." With a little hesitation, we join her. I can't remember all the words, and apparently I am not alone. We stumble a little through God restoring or reviving or something my soul. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death*—that's the verse we all know too well, and for a moment we are praying in unison.

But after that the psalm begins to fall apart. Someone lifts a voice, trying to lead our part of the circle, but another part of the circle has gotten ahead of us and another behind. The psalm is breaking into sections. There is no harmony. This is Kelly's last night, and here we are, scattered like sheep without a shepherd.

We are in the valley of the shadow of death and I am fearing evil. It feels to me like evil is hovering over the prison in the form of a government ready to kill a woman who prayed with me when my father was dying of cancer. There isn't a thing I can do about it except pray this psalm and damn if we can't get it right.

Our broken, fragmented, pieced-together psalm goes jarringly into the night sky. With some of us echoing one refrain and others singing another, the holy cacophony lights the hazy night sky with its imperfection, its plea.

An old hippie with long white hair lights a paschal candle. People mill about. We wait as appeals are rejected, one after another. Hope, like that paschal candle in the wind, fleeting. My phone battery died two appeals ago. No more tweets, just waiting.

At 10:30 we see the coroner's van come down the hill. "She's dead," someone whispers. "They would have told us," says another.

And then, the van keeps going. Past the guards, out the gate, the final insult. The body is being taken away from the family, I think, sent to the crime lab for an autopsy to determine the cause of death. Except, says someone who knows the execution procedures, that doesn't make sense. The van is always last in the procession and this time not only was it first, it was alone. We wait.

Someone starts praying prayers for the dead. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil : for thou art with me.*

"Not tonight," I hear from my part of the crowd. The poison isn't safe, they say. The drugs, like the cover of the moon, are cloudy. Not tonight, we repeat.

Go home, say the guards. Go home, bark the drug- and bomb-sniffing dogs. Go home, say the media as they turn off their cameras. There's nothing more to see. Not tonight. *Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.*

Last week, a new death warrant was issued for Kelly Gissendaner. She is scheduled for execution on September 29.