On a summer night in 2009, in a small red house on South Rose Street, near the Duwamish River, in one of Seattle’s most diverse neighborhoods, Isaiah Kalebu, a mentally ill, 23-year-old man, murdered Teresa Butz and raped her partner, Jennifer Hopper. “Why do these things happen?,“ Hopper would ask her pastor. “How does somebody become this guy?”

In “While the City Slept,” Eli Sanders, the associate editor of The Stranger, Seattle’s weekly newspaper, who won the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the crime, addresses these fundamental (and perhaps unanswerable) questions in a meticulously detailed, beautifully written and riveting narrative that illuminates the love, courage and compassion of the victims and their families, Isaiah’s descent into violence, and the incapacity and unwillingness of our mental health and criminal justice systems to make therapeutic interventions that can save lives (and money).

Although his yearbook photographs from Puget Sound Adventist Academy showed him dunking a basketball and smiling in a sweater with a loose turtleneck, Sanders demonstrates that Kalebu manifested signs of psychological problems from an early age. And despite numerous acts of violence against members of his family and claims that he was an African king whose home had been stolen from him by sugar traders in the 19th century, “designated mental health professionals” determined in 2008 that Kalebu did not meet the state of Washington’s criteria for involuntary commitment.

Two days after he was released without medication or follow-up care, Kalebu assaulted his mother and was arrested. Released from jail on his own recognizance, Kalebu lived with Rachel Kalebu, his aunt. After she forced him to leave (because she feared for her life), Rachel and her roommate, J.J. Jones, died.
in an apparent arson.

 Appearing again in court, Kalebu did not have his pre-trial release revoked. He slept in parks or rode the bus, Sanders indicates, “accompanied only by his dog and his delusions,” until he came upon Butz and Hopper.

 Somehow, Sanders reports, Hopper has been able to affirm Kalebu’s humanity, and without in any way absolving him of responsibility, has been able to “inhabit a space of forgiveness.” Because when you forgive, “you no longer allow what that person did to diminish you.”

 In an email exchange Sanders had in 2015 with Kalebu, the (still) young man seemed much the same: in a “demanding, unrepentant and unreflective place, diagnosis a mystery, underlying issues unknown, sentence unending.”

 And, Sanders reminds us, he is among 20 percent to 30 percent of the prison population in the state of Washington who are mentally ill, about the average for the United States. His incarceration (awaiting trial for rape and murder) cost $114,519. The bill to prosecute him was $550,000. His defense cost the taxpayers more than $702,000. And with a life expectancy of 73 years, his incarceration may cost $1,850,000.

 That is why, Sanders concludes, it is shortsighted and self-defeating for politicians to underfund public health programs and continue to pay for prisons that incarcerate more people than any other nation.

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