

ON THE IDEA OF GIVING ADVICE

When I first came to prison the years ahead of
me felt unreal, like stories in a horror novel.
All these years later, the time behind me feels more
unreal, as if the stories came true.

I wonder how much of myself is left, how much of who
I am is just a reflection of the joint.

The young guys see me as a picture of themselves inside
their own nightmares, inside their own sad tales.

"Tell me what it was like back in the day," they
ask but don't really want to know.

In the shadows of my eyes are the tracks of
a misspent youth and pain-filled regrets.

Young guards wonder at the decades piled on top of
my old number, issued before they could count.

It's an odd mix of elder respect sitting unsettled on
top of their standard contempt for all of us.

But, in some of their voices, there is a kind of
sympathy that neither of us feels comfortable feeling.

On the way to the chow hall in the morning, before
the day has fully begun, I feel the weight.
The weight of days, the press of time,
while I add up how often I've come this way.
The first time I was much younger and more sure of my step;
now the path is steeper.

My advice to those who will serve time is not complicated.
I won't try to obfuscate the truth of this life.
You will walk through hell, and you will be overwhelmed
everyday until you can be overwhelmed no more.
Hide who you are somewhere the guards can't find;
and don't tell anyone where, ever.

-Kenneth E. Hartman, C-19449

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