

I AM THE PRISON

I am society's collector of debts, and

my purse is the bottomless maw of time
insatiably storing the payments of days
implacably totaling the months and the years.

I am the abode of hope become hopelessness,

of routine so deadly
the simple act of living
becomes a weary, a numbing task.

I hold within me men who cling to life,

when even to hope is futile;
men who walk my stone-walled corridors
in silent resignation, in passive waiting.

I hold some who have been long forgotten

by a world callously indifferent;
they face no future but that of a grave,
starkly numbered in a barren cemetery.

I hold within me the confused, the misguided,

the lost and the unlucky.
The depraved and perverted, the cheat and the murderer;
these, too, are mine.

I hold within my unfeeling walls and bars

the flawed and the inoperable;
the unfinished and malformed works
of an imperfect civilization.

I hold within me men who not long ago knew peace and freedom;

the keenly biting freshness of a winter night,
the welcoming laugh of a child;
men who now know only the rending pain of utter desolation.

I encage not only the tired old men

but—sadly—the tired young men;
and some I hold because
the blindfolded eyes of justice were truly unseeing.

Come—come and look upon the faces of these I hold

and see thereon the reflection of my image
engraved as a deep and final proof
of society's inadequacy, of man's inhumanity.

I AM THE PRISON . . . and

I am the bitterness in the hearts
of the many who became mine
only because they stood alone and poor.

I am the contempt of all who have learned,

with the disillusioned knowledge of experience,
that law and justice are not always noble or just
but are oftentimes purchasable commodities.

I am the eroding cynicism of the many

who heard those presuming to infallibility
as they passed judgment upon them,
the fallible.

I am more formidable, even, than my stone walls

and steel bars and lethal gun towers.
For not only do I confine—I slowly, and irrevocably
destroy the souls of those I hold within me.

I am loneliness and heartache . . . and

my teeth sink deep into the souls of men.

I am bleak emptiness wherein

feeling is a sickness bone-deep;
anxiety swells and thrusts;
uncertainty constricts and stifles.

I am memory that comes violently in the night

like the tearing scream of a trumpet
sounding forth from the grim orchestra
of frustration, futility, despair.

I am the repository of infinite abortive dreams,

of numberless human failures;
the holder of countless stories
never told, never lived.

Yes. I AM THE PRISON . . . and

my viciousness can never be truly portrayed.
To know it, it must be felt . . .
it must be endured.

Always I am cold and harsh and merciless;

for I am the intolerant conscience
of a Janus-faced society.

At times I am vibrant with contempt

for the lost and groping mass
stirring aimlessly within me.

Then . . . I see one head uplifted.

And in that single face,
raised to the free and open sky,
I see exposed the very soul of man.

It is then I know . . .

'tis *I* who should not exist.

I am the faces in the visiting room,

their every word and action
reflecting
my brooding watchfulness.

I am the tautly stretched face

of that man in prison blue
remembering
the past warmth of love and tenderness.

I am the gut-searing anguish destroying the man

who is with desperate hope,
waiting
for the letters, the visitors, that never come.

I am the deeply etched faces

of those who wait and wait and wait . . .
their only sustenance that of
heartbreak, disappointment, and vain regret.

Yes, I AM THE PRISON!

Wherein the smothering confines of a steel-barred cage
crush with the weight of inhuman reality;
wherein the endless emptiness of the days
and the shattering loneliness of the eternal nights
repeat and repeat and repeat my message . . . endlessly.

RICHARD LORNE HUNT*

* Inmate No. 27939, Arizona State Prison.