Prisoner

John Stone

In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.
W. H. Auden

This is the house of Anopheles
in the city of malaria
that infects 500 million souls a year
in this reeling world
and kills a million, so many of them children.
I hear them crying, not here in Atlanta,
but in Africa. In Vietnam.

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I have never before been a prisoner.
But in 1965, I was ushered down the footfall
halls of this federal penitentiary.
Claustrophobia walked beside me
as the great doors clanked open,
then shut behind me.

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This is the room where we commit malaria.
This is the inmate who has volunteered.
For his pains, he will get not only malaria,
but money for cigarettes, time off his sentence.
In this room he becomes
an honorary veteran of the Vietnam War,
whose jungles bred the malaria
now ready to assault his blood.

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The prisoner jokes: “You’re gonna adopt me, now,
ain’t cha, Doc?” He rolls up his sleeve. “You gonna
get me outa this place, right?” Out comes the vial,
inside it a single single-minded mosquito.
The Anopheles walks his arm.

The prisoner in the next bed reminds him
that he has about two weeks left in which to pray.
That he should smoke while he still can.

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Leeuwenhoek made a microscope and looked
and saw the red blood cells, the spermatozoa.
Had he looked at teeming blood, he would have seen
malaria, too, riding the red cells to the reaches
of the body, malignant spirits, terrorists by land, sea, sky.
Animalcules he would have called them. As for
spermatozoa, they are not officially discussed behind bars.

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The prisoner’s disease announces itself: headhammering;
then chills, then rigors that shake south Atlanta.
The prisoner writhes like an epileptic, grinds his teeth.
He expects worse: it comes. His fever spikes to 104,
He boils in his skin in the valley of thirst.
He is a burning man. He is sick. Low sick.
He suffers.

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The soldier in Vietnam suffers, too,
wounded in battle, reeling with malaria.
The drugs for his malaria no longer work.
The soldier bares his arm and his blood flies
to Atlanta stopping only for fuel.
He has three weeks left before his malaria
rises up again, wanting more of him.

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During the past 40 years, I have thought often
of that prisoner, who volunteered to breathe
the bad air of this world, who sickened
with the mosquito, but did not die.
Nameless, unpraised, he became a hero
as surely as that first physician who passed
the catheter through his own quaking heart,
a hero as surely as the soldier still pinned down
by the gunfire of the ages,
who has also borne our griefs,
who has carried our sorrows.