

Three Poems from,
Shahid Reads His Own Palm, by R Dwayne Betts

Winter Hunger

Your father watches the flecks add up.
He says the wind-blown dead insects
against the window conjure ghosts:
tossed dice, the South, and his regrets.

You're driving north on roads that glow
with high beams searching night. You cuss
and think about the wheel's curved bone
pressed on your palms. The hard callus

burns and you curse the time—eight years
these towns on green billboards were home—
Greenville, Nottoway, Sussex. Names
of prisons, dark restless tombstones.

Words swallow air between you two
as a Newport lights the car's inside.
Your father has listened and now wants
to talk. He pauses to glare wild-eyed.

His voice is broken bottles, smoke,
flesh. He knows you burned his letters.
In the back, your younger brother sleeps
between your wife and child for hours.

Outside, a storm begins with rain.
Your father sips his third straight beer
and you remember prison's night.
He never mentions love's austere

and lonely offices. And now—
when your son wakes—what will you say
about fathers? What will you say
about a voice cuffed to mistakes?

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Ghazal

Men bleed without insight in prison?
A hand on neck starts a fight in prison.

He held the night's air in his fist and screamed,
then sent word by scribbled kite in prison.

Steve's eyes broke open to the bluest black,
then he wore homemade tights in prison.

Marquette splintered, deranged, pigeon insane.
He learned there is never flight in prison.

You wouldn't use a rusted blade to pull
a wrist vein, but a man just might in prison.

We read *Midsummer Night's Dream* on the yard,
then Snoop said, "I am a sprite in prison."

Who stared at lipstick on his forehead—
believed passion ignites in prison.

Who celled with his father at Augusta,
some discovery – birthright in prison.

But, for real, why does any of it matter?
Some men never pray at night in prison.

Blame me. Write another poem, a sad psalm.
Shahid, sing for the gods, right in prison.

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Red Onion State Prison

A warehouse of iron
bunks: straight lines
& right angles

flush against the gutted
side of a mountain.
Inside, white paint

cracks into a thousand
pockmarks and listens
to the sound of a padlock

splitting a man's scalp &
voices of guards in shotguns
or the hand that tilts

a slender metal rod,
then scrapes it against
concrete & stretches night

longer than a sinner's
prayer in Red Onion's small
ruined cells where ten thousand

years of sentences
beckon over heads & hearts,
silent, a promise, like mistletoe.