

P E N I T E N T I A R Y



#### Notes to an inmate

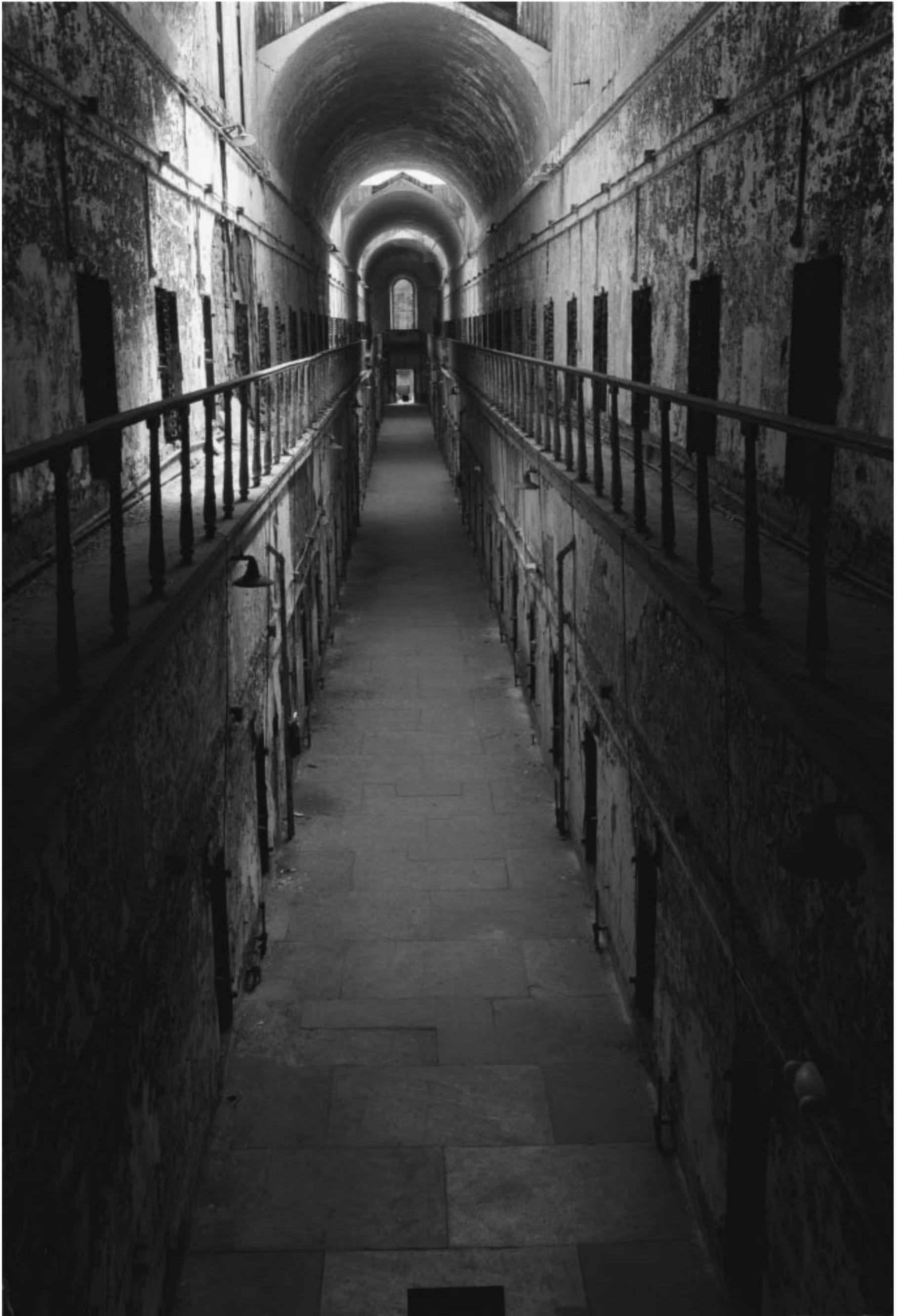
I have come out of curiosity. I am here for the thrill. I think of dungeons, of the body held captive in chains, of the medieval mind. Walls impossible to penetrate, so thick as to prevent even the slightest of thought of escape, unless you are cunning and imagine a tunnel passing underneath (but that would come later—years later—a brilliant plot of genius surfacing desperately from a broken heart. The heart could never submit to the nature of this place).

You were led in, your head covered with a hood, so as to prevent us from seeing you, your face, or you from recognizing ours, should we meet in some distant future, on the other side, we would not be reminded of this encounter now.

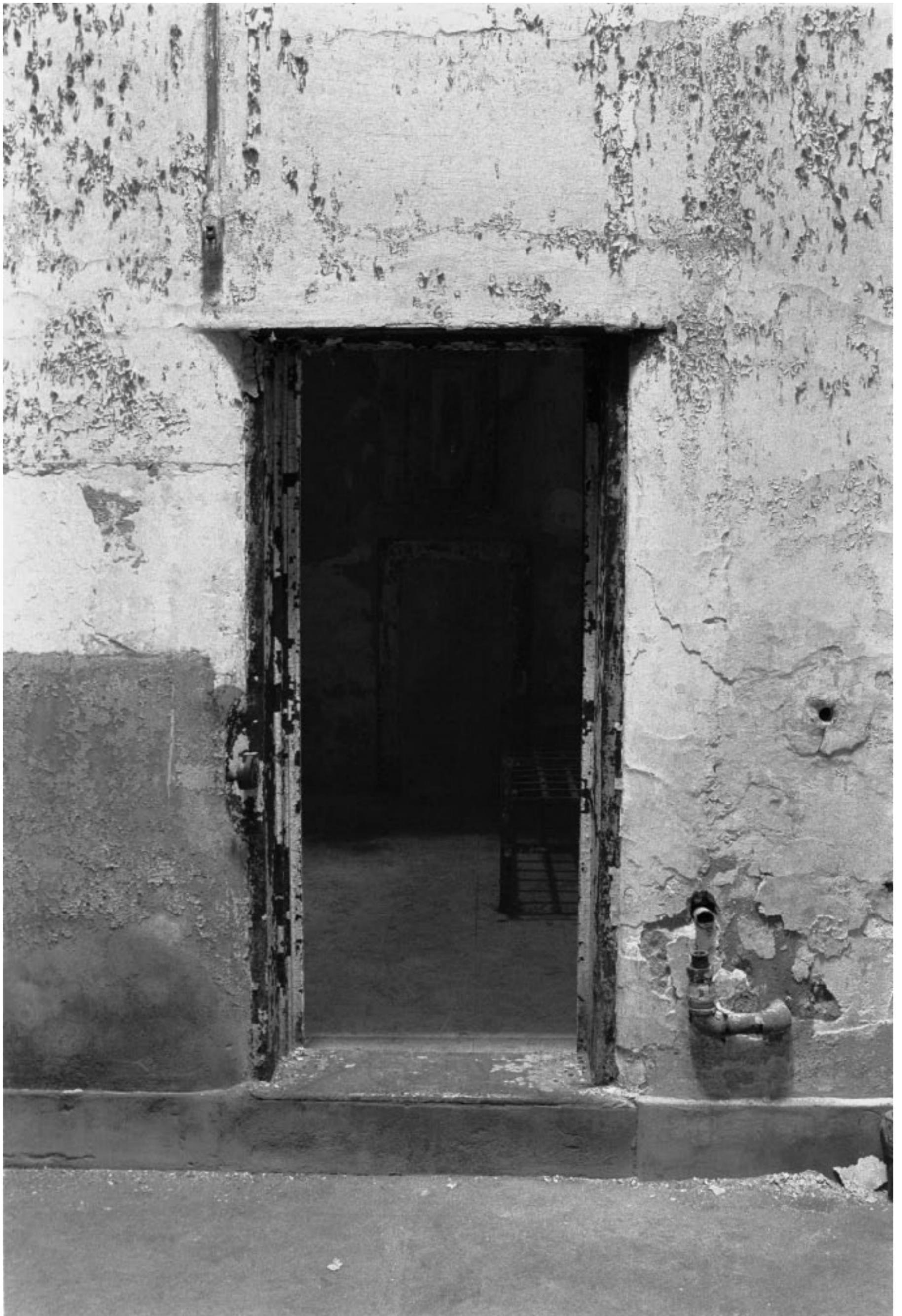
Well, that was the reason they gave. When the head is hooded and the senses blindsided, the mind enters a delirious state and in the body—your body—anxiety gushes. This was the opening salvo, this was the initiation rite.

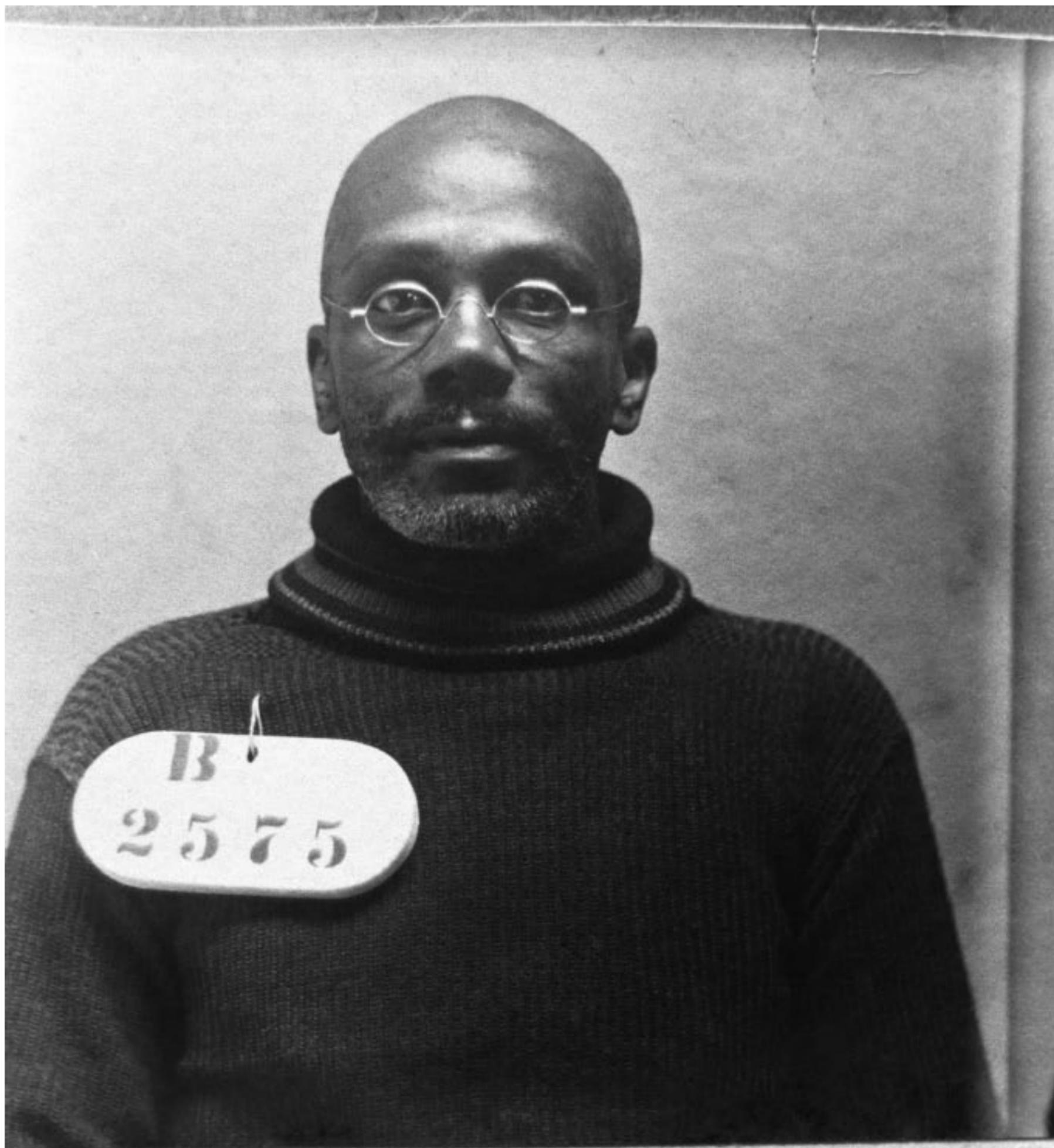
As I pass through now I see where I am going, I know where I am. Although you are no longer here I feel your chill as I enter. My presence here is not that unusual, we were allowed to pass through then. At that time we could not see you behind the thick windowless door, but we knew you were there.

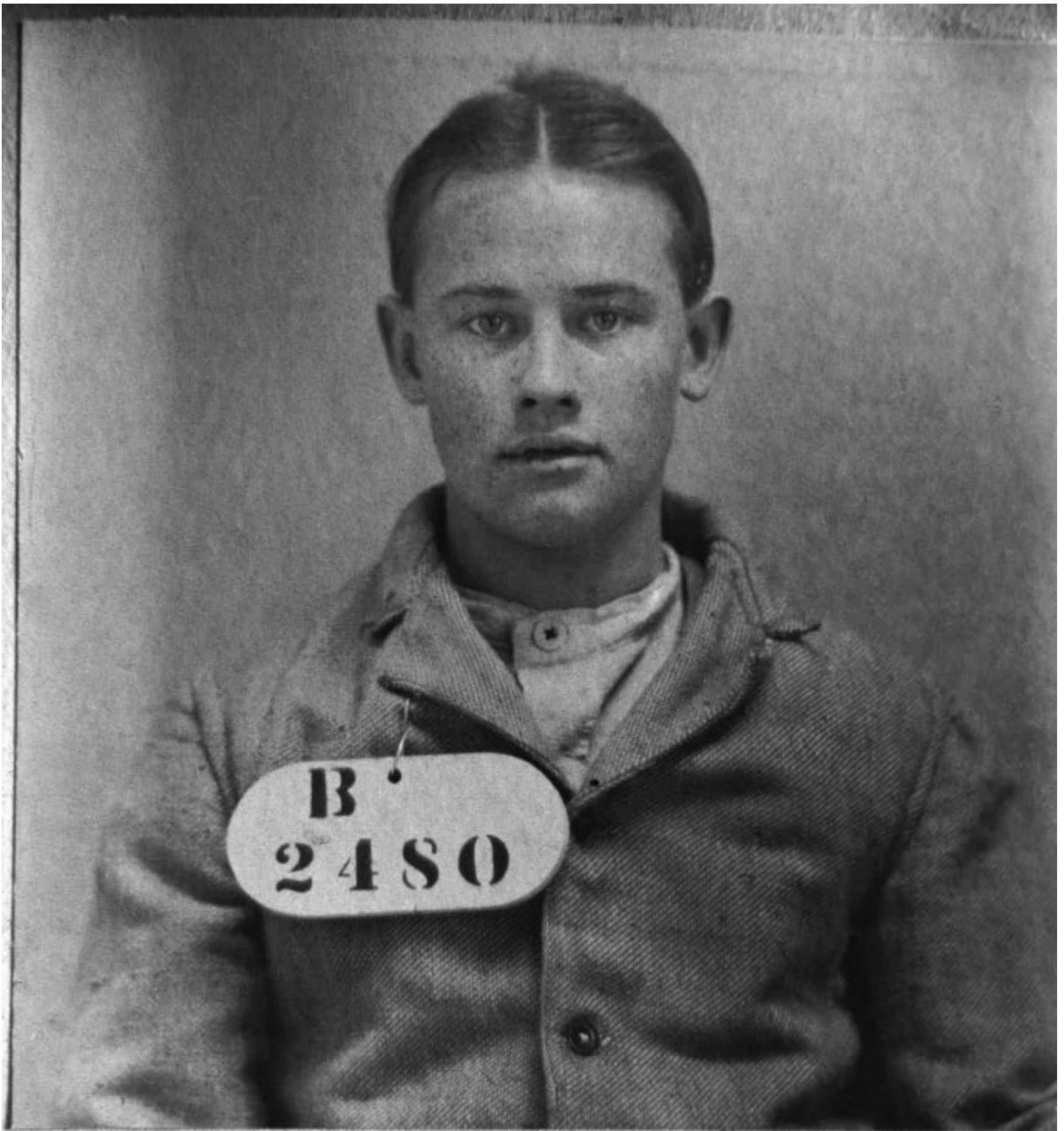
You think there is something I am looking for, as I, self-conscious about the sound of my stepping, peer into hole after hole. It is awkward as I conjure your presence, pulling your shadow out of a dark recess of my mind, placing you, once again, back here—reluctant, I have no doubt. I imagine myself displacing you, as I enter and occupy that precious little space you had to consider your own. I justify my curiosity as interest in the historical, as such objective, not a voyeuristic fascination with the parameters of your life in this impossibly claustrophobic space. The taste of lime permeates—there is no air—I step back out into the corridor.



I stare at you unable to escape from my gaze. I rob the last thread of decency you imagine you still hold onto—you retreat into a fiction that there remains any option other than exposing the most private of bodily needs as they transform into desperate acts. I dismiss your urges as animal, to be measured as less than human, from which I am able to separate, to elevate, myself. I do not consider my stare a transgression because you—you are here only as long as I permit. And for my imagination I cannot be judged. I am free, to enter and to leave, to dismiss my thoughts as I please. In this situation I am in the position of power.

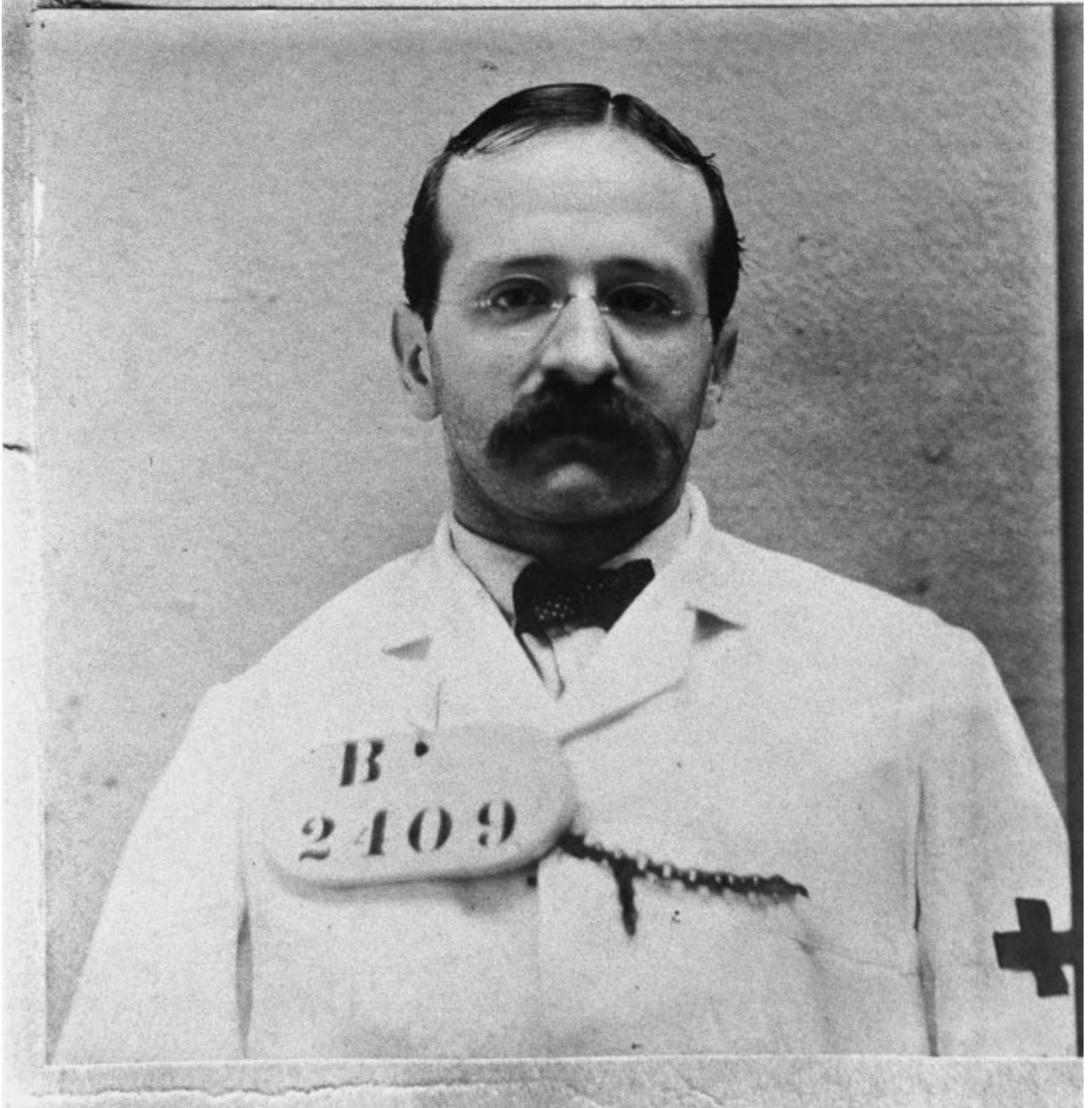














If you are right, there is something I look for. What else brings me here, now, at this time. Am I here for your pardon? For your insight into the part I play in my reckless abandon of concern for you and those like you, my disdain, my refusal to care?

Well, I care that I am not you, that you are not someone to whom I am bound by blood, for whom my love is a given: my father or mother, sister, brother. In as much as you are other, are different from, are less than me, I need not care.

You mean nothing to me.

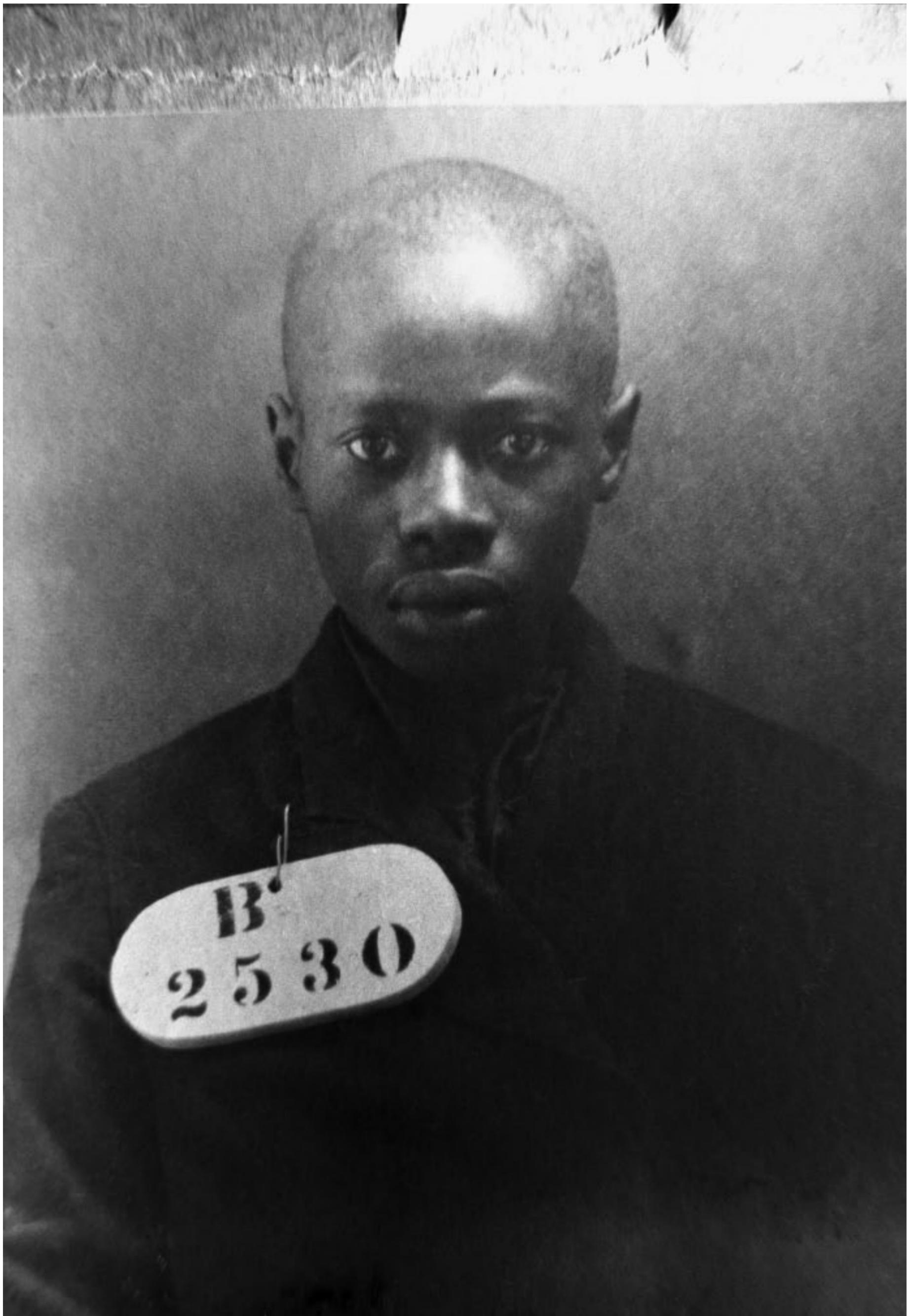
Do not claim that I am complicit, there is too much I would have to give up to change all of this, all of that. Besides time has passed.

It was you who committed the crime. That is why you were here. It was a just cause to put you away. This is the best we had come up with to maintain an acceptable order of things. This was the part you were destined to play.

We were safer in your absence. You were genetically predisposed to violence, to mayhem, as such your crimes were premeditated. It was the unusual shape of your brain. It was the color of your skin.

And if I no longer can place my trust in this, it would complicate the matter, it would become difficult—that your being here was perhaps an error, an untimely mistake, that in fact it was not you who had committed the crime or that in another time, or in another place, the act for which you were condemned would not be seen as criminal, rather might be seen as a justified act, an act of survival, an act of defense, an act that had at its root a just cause. Do not complicate this matter, you were guilty, as charged—you must be.

There were the rumors that you were framed, that it was then things had gone wrong, that you were incriminated because someone had to be. There



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You allow me to imagine dangerously as I peer into the grating, into the entrance to the hole, into death row, as I replay your transgressions.

The passing of time, torturous, one minute into another impossible to fathom, much less the passage of days into weeks, months into the finality of years—your isolation. The invisibility of your life exists in the story of this place, witnessed in the peeling paint and walls as they decompose.

My curiosity, just curious enough, you understand, with a cautious discretionary distance, as you careen dangerously and fall into the abyss. Your mind, desperate, resists, lost, abandoned to the hours of silence staring pathetically at that same blank wall.

I refuse the evidence of the fragility of your humanity that lingers, in the decay, the architecture rotting. The nostalgic seduction, within which I hide, separates me from your reality—this is not the glaring shadowless twenty-four hour electronic surveillance spectacle somewhere now down the road not too far.

I imagine you, buffered safely by the distance of time. It is easy for me.

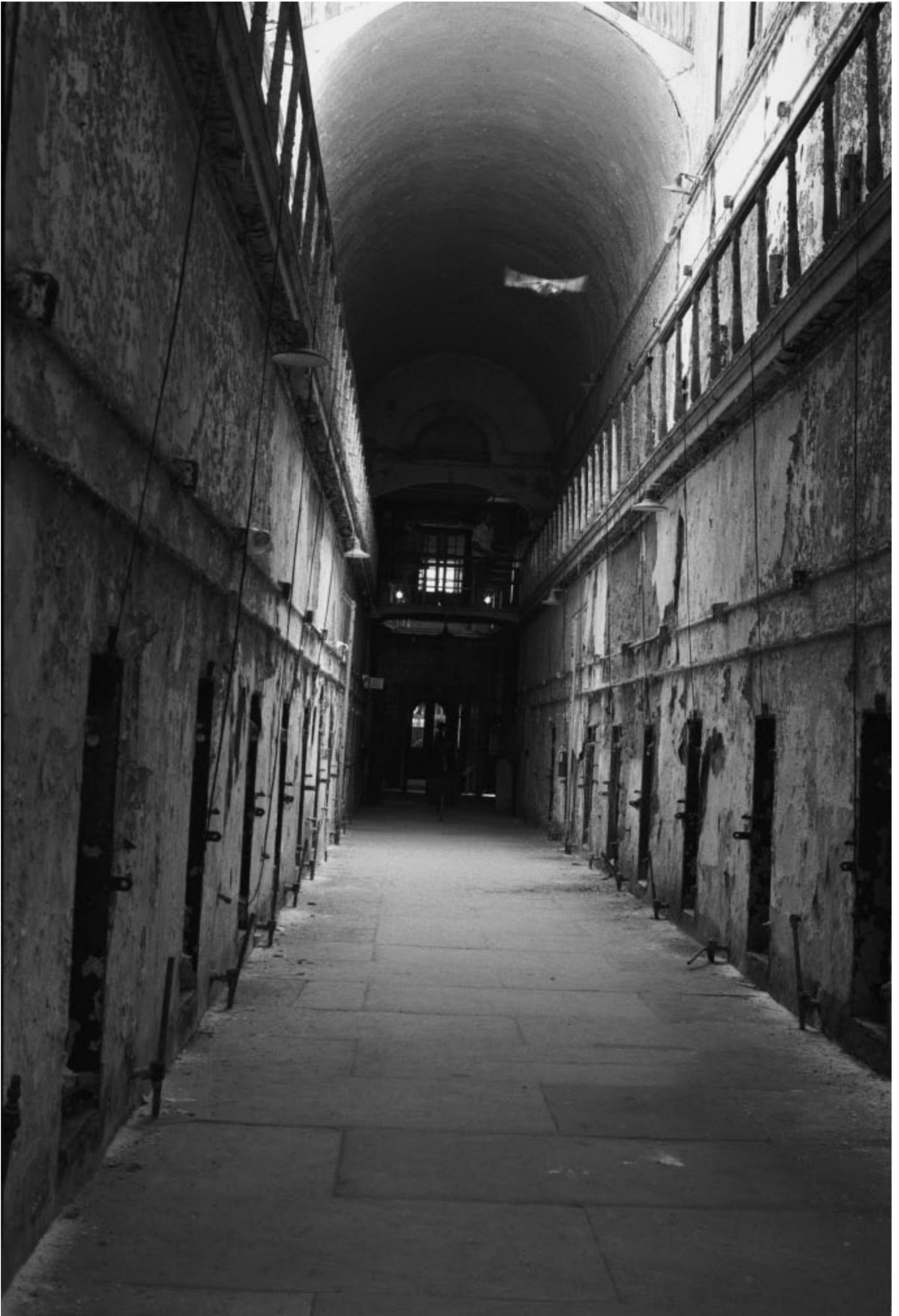
Yes, accuse me, but I am not willing to risk my comfortable position, to have you now stand in the flesh before me. I will not submit to the burden of knowing directly this raw reality for you.

Will you, can you—do you dare—try convince me that it should not be this way?

Your criminality provides evidence of the absence of mine, the measure of my innocence is balanced by the lack of yours, you are my mirror. But what if by chance my being free was dependent on the history of your not having been, what if the one were not independent of the other, if somehow, although unknown to me, our fates were inextricably linked. What if your economic lack, the cause of your crime, provided for my economic gain, the lack of a need for a crime of mine, that the one cannot be separated from the other and that in this you and I are curiously bound. Fortunately for me such a causal line can never be drawn.

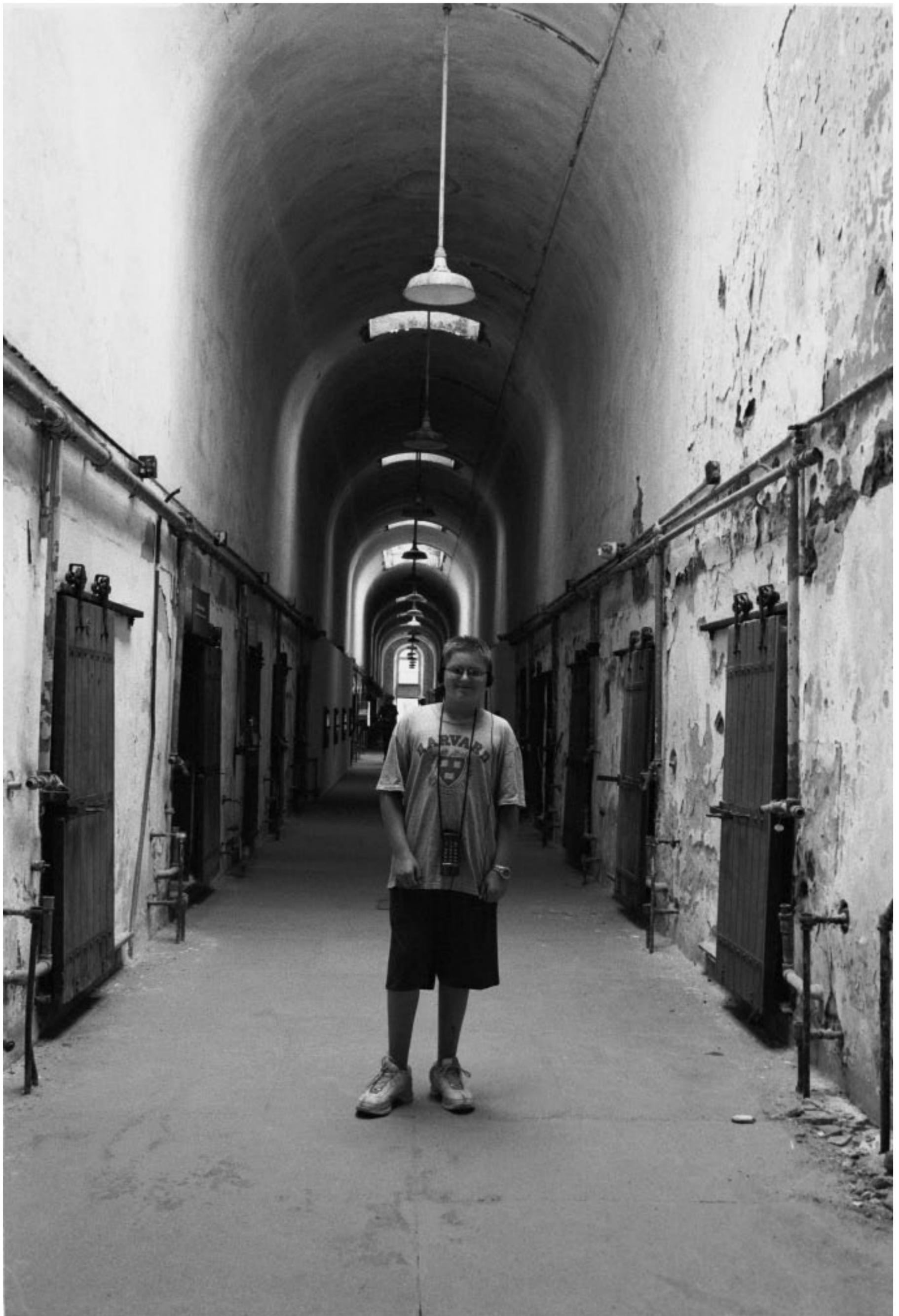
I will tell you I am not without doubts that it may not be that simple, that a cautionary end inevitably accepts some uncertainty. An air of complication fills this place—just look at your face.



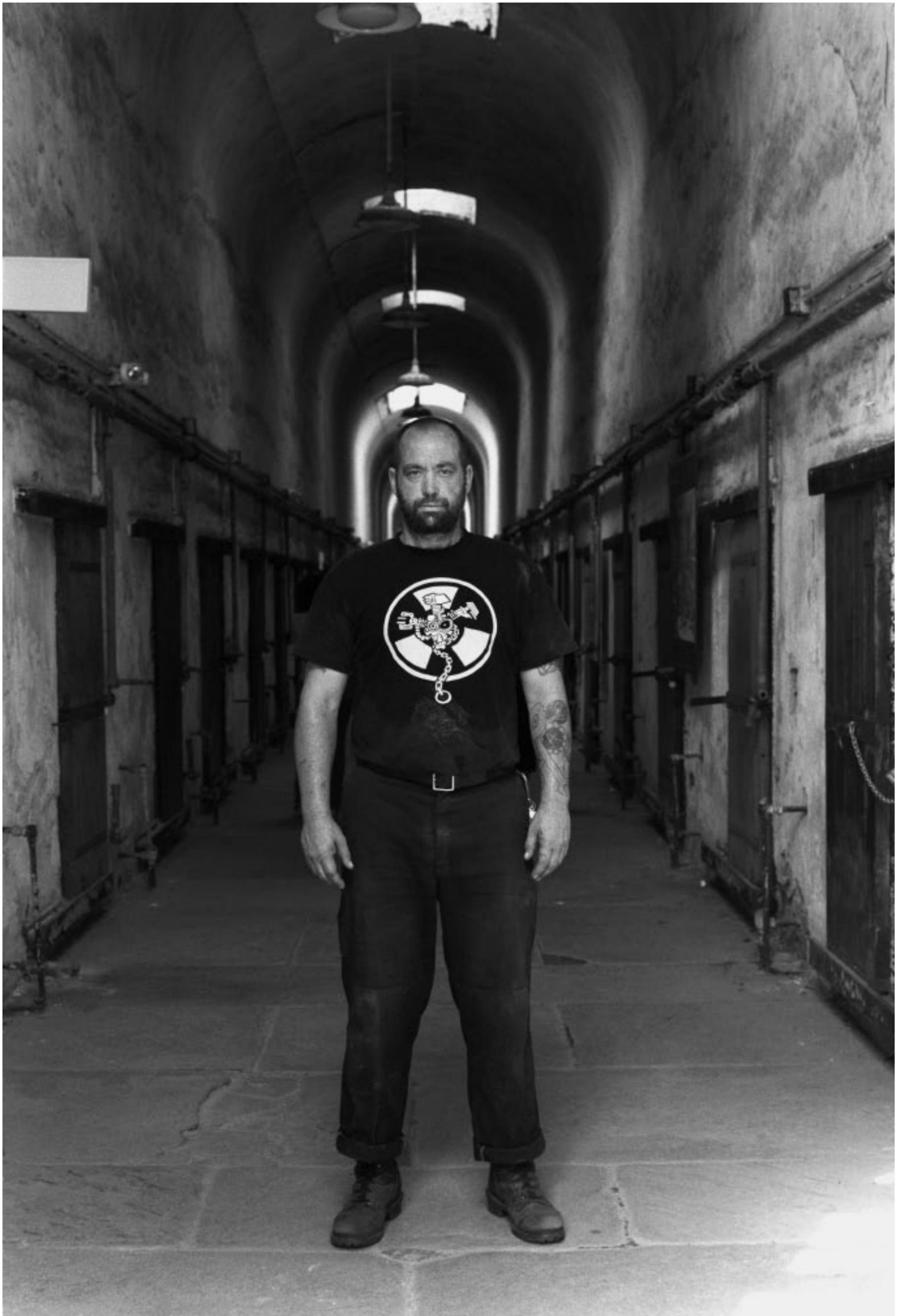














an artist's project for Eastern State Penitentiary, Philadelphia  
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