Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane

Hard Rock was "known not to take no shit from nobody," and he had the scars to prove it: Split purple lips, lumped ears, welts above His yellow eyes, and one long scar that cut Across his temple and plowed through a thick Canopy of kinky hair.

The WORD was that Hard Rock wasn't a mean nigger Anymore, that the doctors had bored a hole in his head, Cut out part of his brain, and shot electricity Through the rest. When they brought Hard Rock back, Handcuffed and chained, he was turned loose, Like a freshly gelded stallion, to try his new status. And we all waited and watched, like indians at a corral, To see if the WORD was true.

As we waited we wrapped ourselves in the cloak Of his exploits: "Man, the last time, it took eight Screws to put him in the Hole." "Yeah, remember when he Smacked the captain with his dinner tray?" "He set The record for time in the Hole—67 straight days!"

"Oh Hard Rock! man, that's one crazy nigger."
And then the jewel of a myth that Hard Rock had once bit A screw on the thumb and poisoned him with syphilitic spit. The testing came, to see if Hard Rock was really tame. A hillbilly called him a black son of a bitch And didn't lose his teeth, a screw who knew Hard Rock From before shook him down and barked in his face. And Hard Rock did nothing. Just grinned and looked silly, His eyes empty like knot holes in a fence.

And even after we discovered that it took Hard Rock Exactly 3 minutes to tell you his first name, We told ourselves that he had just wised up, Was being cool; but we could not fool ourselves for long, And we turned away, our eyes on the ground. Crushed.

He had been our Destroyer, the doer of things We dreamed of doing but could not bring ourselves to do, The fears of years, like a biting whip, Had cut grooves too deeply across our backs.
Down to Tartarus

Deep in the mists of mythology lays the tale of an incredible fall. Kronos, Titan and conqueror of Heaven, is hurled into an underworld prison by his son, Zeus. Even the strong can be crushed, and in "Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane", by Etheridge Knight, a strong hero is tragically defeated. Hard Rock, a "crazy nigger" (20), comes back to his world a lesser man from "the Hole" (19). The other prisoners look up to him, and find their Hercules broken. The hope that Hard Rock embodies is destroyed along with him, leaving nothing but useless anger and despair.

The other prisoners worship Hard Rock as a paragon of all they secretly hope to be. He is their "Destroyer" (34) and the "doer of things/ [they] dreamed of doing but could not bring [themselves] to do" (34-35). He gives them hope against the system they are trapped in, and his small rebellions seem proof that their captors are not invincible. If he can survive their punishments, and still "[smack] the captain with his dinner tray" (18), then their fear recedes. His very name—"Hard Rock" (1)—denotes invulnerability. He is something they can count on when their fate is uncertain, a man "known not to take no shit/ from nobody" (1-2). "The cloak/ of his exploits" (15-16) makes them feel secure; they are content to watch him rebel and support him silently. Hard Rock is undefeated, and the efforts of the "Screws" (17), the oppressive symbols of authority, do not amount to much. As he represents hope, so does his defeat represent despair.

Even hard rock can be worn down to dust, and hope crushed to despair. When Hard Rock returns from the "Hole" (19) he is "a freshly gelded stallion" (12), ground down until he "[isn’t] a mean nigger/ anymore" (7-8). This is devastating to the other prisoners. Their hero has been conquered, and the hope he gives them evaporates. His eyes are "empty like knot holes in a fence" (28). He once was the "Destroyer" (34); now he is "nothing" (27). His broken state reminds them that they are trapped, and they "[turn] away" from him, "[their] eyes on the ground" (33). The "fears of years" (36) press down on them "like a biting whip" (36), and the one who seemed invincible has been proven mortal. They put all their hopes in Hard Rock, and they were "Crushed" (33) along with him.

Hard Rock is an icon for the prisoners, and his defeat a desecration of that icon. His strength gave the other prisoners hope, but now all he gives them is a broken image of what the system can do to them. This hero worship relates to all of humanity. Men set their hopes on their heroes, and the overpowering of an archetypal hero shatters those hopes. Hard Rock is a strong symbol of power. Like Kronos, however, Hard Rock shows that even the strong can be defeated, a message of caution for mankind. When hope is defeated, there is nothing left but despair.