Amos D. Squire,
Chief Physician of Sing Sing 1914-1925

Jill McDonough

Dr. Squire witnessed one hundred thirty eight executions before he quit. He’d watch their breathing, signal on the exhale, watch a man, hooded, strain against straps. Then guards opened a shirt, swabbed sweat so Squire could listen with his stethoscope.

Many times I have been so overwrought I was alarmed by the thought that what I heard was my own pulse rather than that of the dying man.

One day in 1925 he stood at the edge of the rubber mat, just within reach of the chair. He gave the signal and the man was electrocuted as usual, except I felt for the first time a wild desire to extend my hand and touch him.
Blackwater

Jill McDonough

For gifts beguile men’s minds and their deeds as well.
—The Returns, Fragment 5, tr. Hugh G. Evelyn-White

The Nostoi, the lost Greek epic of vets come home,
is only still around in what someone worked
to save. Some summary, a line or two.
For gifts beguile men’s minds and their deeds as well:
one shred kept out of five lost volumes, words
distilled from our whole huge history of heroes, minds
and deeds, our whole idea of home. These days
we need some whole ideas. The ground around
us shifts for female veterans, fighter drones,
black ops, defense contractors, other pairs
of words we haven’t reconciled yet.
So many now returning from so much.
Even Blackwater’s founder—Erik Prince!
his name as hard to believe as his Hitler bangs—
says his employees aren’t mercenaries, they’re
loyal Americans. Forget the fact
that sometimes they’re from Chile, Bosnia,
wherever. Look at “mercenary.” From
the Latin merces: payment, reward, cost.
From mercenarius, or “hireling” in
King James’ Gospel of John: The shepherd or
the hireling, who should we choose to watch over the sheep?
Back out of all this now too much for us
there was a river, cool and slow and stained
with spruce and hemlock. Blackwater River, Great
Dismal Swamp. And Prince bought the land, and took
the name. Perfect: you can’t make this stuff up.
For gifts beguile men’s minds and their deeds as well:
so many tried to warn us, give us this gift
clear as black water, as minds and deeds and home.
Particular Crimes

Jill McDonough

The man who burnt a city block,
the one who left a homeless vet
for dead, the one who raped a grandmother
for hours: they all turn in
their tidy work on time.

The Boston Globe on a stabbing:
* hacking and thirty-seven times. *
Sometimes I can’t sleep at night, pull
the shower curtain quick to catch
whoever’s hiding there off guard.

When they meet Iago, they love him:
* he was justified. * Justified?
I shake my head, quote the play,
write line numbers on the board.
They all hold the book
in one hand, gesture with the other
like lawyers. They know lawyers.
All in matching suits.
They understand Iago,
and they want him to suffer. They laugh,
discuss what * torments will ope his lips. *

The coordinator approved
my proposed texts by saying
* I don’t think we have anyone who committed those particular crimes. *

* Othello, Medea, Beloved: *
Not one of my best students
smothered his pale wife with a pillow,
stabbed his small sons for revenge, slit
his baby daughter’s throat to keep her
out of bondage. Not one of us
will scatter the pieces
of our brother in our wake.
This Is Your Chance

Jill McDonough

English Composition at South Middlesex Correctional Center. Julie reads out loud, and I praise her super thesis, then show how her paragraphs veer away from it, just summarize. And is she pissed! Too pissed to listen when her classmates try to help. Amanda offers Act 2 Scene 1—“Now I do love her too”—as evidence of Iago’s state of mind. But Julie’s shutting down, frowning at her handwritten draft, writing that took her weeks. Hey Julie, I say. Julie doesn’t look up. Says What. Says I hate this stupid paper now. So I say Hey Julie, Amanda’s helping you—write down what she’s saying. She says I’m aggravated. I think they take classes on naming their feelings. I say I know it but you need to pull it together, or you’ll end up screwing yourself. This is your chance. We’re all quiet, breathing together, willing her to break out of this. Then: a little miracle. I look around the room and see that everyone is beautiful. Each did something special with her hair. Hey, I say, again. I say hey a lot in prison. Hey wait a minute. What’s up with everybody’s hair? Mabel got a haircut. Ellie’s hair is long and black and gleaming down her back, Amanda’s in french braids. Julie’s freshly blonde, down to the roots. You guys all look great! They laugh. They’re happy I noticed. Thank god I noticed; now, for a minute, we are women in a room, talking about their hair. Julie says Amanda did her highlights, and Sandy blew it out. Good job, guys. She looks great. And then I say, Julie. Look at you all pissed off over your paper when you’re so lucky! Look at all these good friends you have. Helping with your paper, doing your hair. . . She nods. She looks me in the eye, back with us, back on track. I know, she says. I need to work on my gratitude.
Where You Live

Jill McDonough

In the waiting rooms of our prisons, women wait
with well-dressed kids. The kids
are cuter here, somehow, than any body has a right
to be. I get in first, but no one’s angry; I look
like a nice lady, smile at the babies, carry books
but no briefcase, don’t wear a lawyer’s suit. Going in
to talk about Othello with rapists, murderers,
con-men, thieves; all men defined by what they did
one time, now a long time ago. Prison; a place
where people live. It might be nice to know
your neighbors are reading Shakespeare instead
of carving a shiv. Where you live it’s sunny, where I live,
today, it’s not. When Josey was offered that stake in the bar
in L.A., we were instant Los Angelenos in our minds.
How quickly it happens, Eliot Spitzer behind bars
in an instant, Cheney arrested in Spain. All of us
imagining him there. Our imagined house with its imagined
Meyer lemon tree, the hard time we had parking
our imaginary car. How then can anyone imagine it’s so hard
to change? The students in the prison: scholars as soon
as they sign up. Their children, poets as soon as they
rhyme. I want to be a writer, people tell me, and I nod.
Me too. Now, write. Prisons, hospitals, schools, the great
cities, their one-way streets and festivals; we put
our bodies there together, upright and seated,
walking along the hallways built to human scale,
sitting in rooms designed around imagined hordes of you.
Prison cell, cathedral: we imagined them, invented. Built them
around our bodies, or the bodies those spaces would hold.
Women's Prison Every Week

Jill McDonough

Lockers, metal detectors, steel doors, C.O.
to C.O., different forms, desks—mouth open, turn—so
slow I use the time to practice patience,
grace, tenderness for glassed-in guards. The rules
recited as if they were the same rules every week:
I can wear earrings. I cannot wear earrings. I can wear
my hair up. I cannot wear my hair up. I dressed
by rote: cords in blue or brown, grey turtleneck, black
clogs. The prisoners, all in grey sweatshirts, blue jeans,
joked I looked like them, fit in. I didn't think about it,
until I dreamed of being shuffled in, locked
up in there, hustled through the heavy doors.
In the dream the guards just shook their heads, smirked
when I spelled my name, shook the freezing bars.
Instead of nightly escorts out, I'd stay in there
forever. Who would know? So I went to Goodwill,
spent ten bucks on pink angora, walked back down those halls
a movie star. When I stood at the front of the class
there rose a sharp collective sigh. The one
who said she never heard of pandering
until the arraignment said OK, I'm going
to tell her. Then she told me: freedom is wasted
on women like me. They hate the dark cotton, jeans
they have to wear, each one a shadow of the other
their whole sentence. You could wear red! she accused.
Their favorite dresses, silk slips, wool socks all long gone,
bagged up for sisters, moms—maybe Goodwill,
maybe I flicked past them looking for this cotton candy pink
angora cardigan, pearl buttons. They can't stop staring, so
I take it off and pass it around, let each woman hold it
in her arms, appraise the wool between her fingers,
a familiar gesture, second nature, from another world.
Dear Gaybashers

Jill McDonough

The night we got bashed we told Rusty how they drove up, yelled QUEER, threw a hot dog, sped off.

Rusty: Now, is that gaybashing? Or are they just calling you queer? Good point.

Josey pitied the fools: who buys a perfectly good pack of wiener and drives around San Francisco chucking them at gays?

And who speeds off? Missing the point, the pleasure of the bash? Dear bashers, you should have seen the hot dog hit my neck,

the scarf Josey sewed from antique silk kimonos: so gay. You missed laughing at us, us confused, your raw hot dog on the ground.

Josey and Rusty and Bob make fun of the gaybashers, and I wash my scarf in the sink. I use Woolite. We worry about insurance, interest rates. Not hot dogs thrown from F-150s, homophobic freaks. After the bashing, we used the ATM in the sex shop next to Annie’s Social Club, smiled at the kind owner, his handlebar mustache. Astrud Gilberto sang tall and tan and young and lovely, the girl from Ipanema . . . and the dildos gleamed from the walls, a hundred cheerful colors. In San Francisco it rains hot dogs, pity-the-fool. Ass-sized penguins, cock after cock in azure acrylic, butterscotch glass, anyone’s flesh-tone, chrome.
Coffee for Everyone

Jill McDonough

“The admissions made by the men—who were given food whenever they were hungry as well as Starbucks coffee at the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba—played a key role in the government’s decision to proceed with the prosecutions, military and law enforcement officials said.”

The cup exotic in your same old hands, so warm, almost normal after the night you had. Holding a paper cup to your mouth, your poor bleared eyes, your forehead, is American, our gesture. What have you done? An empty table, a paper cup of coffee. A small room filled with the knowledge of good, of freshly ground. Wake up: in America we have plenty. There’s coffee for everyone, even for you. According to the Washington Post, he was enticed with Starbucks coffee. Food when you asked for it, all the coffee you could drink. We are American enough to think, right off, of the ad we should make for Starbucks: quick, cinematic cuts of a desert, a middle-of-the-night rendition. Our brave soliders in green night vision—GO! GO! GO!—surprising you in your spider hole. Then the flight: hooded you in a cavernous cargo hold, circled by special ops, enormous guns. Cut back to you dragged off the plane and past the barking dogs. Split seconds of razor wire, bars, interrogation rooms. Gradual rise of quiet, the calm of a fait accompli, then birdsong, the smell—not smell, aroma—of good hot American coffee, $9.95 a pound. Your fat, hairy hands, cuffed to the table, wrapped around the familiar paper cup, close-up: benevolent goddess, ring of night-vision green. Then a hush falls, hush at the pivot of a nation, the center of a century’s legal thought’s near undoing. And you weep, strain to hold the cup to your sorry face, tell us everything we want to know.
Basic Writing Skills

Jill McDonough

For their final papers, they had to write a thesis and a counterargument. Anything.
Up to them. Forced narcotics counseling is wrong.
Getting raped by your stepfather can make you gay.
A letter to the parole board balancing innocence and remorse. One prisoner did all his assignments in Spanish, translated them at night instead of sleeping. His argument was to his son, in a Puerto Rican juvie on a drug charge.

While I was not there for you when you were growing up, you should not make the same mistakes I made.

He worked on it for weeks, paragraphs with claim, evidence, and analysis to say he was sorry, he thought it was easy money, knows his son still thinks it is, though no money could be harder: mothers dead, fathers separated from sons, imprisoned in different countries, unlikely to ever see each other again. The last day they all read their papers out loud while I stood with my back to the bumpy chalkboard. When he finished I was too choked up to talk, and they were watching when I wiped my eyes.

Hey, professor, what, we gotta make you cry to get an A in here? You want to cry? I could tell stories that’d make you sob.
Joe Hill's Prison

Jill McDonough

The Historical Society in Salt Lake still has some letters, a pamphlet called “Joe Hill’s Remains,” even though he made it clear he wanted his ashes scattered in every state except Utah. Not wanting to be caught dead here. The prison where Joe Hill died is torn down now. Now there’s a Sizzler. Neon and brick at the foot of mountains he must have looked at through bars. They’re beautiful mountains. They look like America, all majesty. Rising purple up beyond the wall where he was shot.
Knowledge is Power
Virtual Universities,
Digital Activists,
and their Discontents