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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 open 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 wieners  
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 Washington Post, February 12, 2008

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.

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