

Poems



Law of Torment

after Jill Lepore

When *military law would not apply*
nor would the laws of war. Eye for an eye,

instead. Or more. Two eyes? Twenty for
one? *Lawful captives taken in Just Warres*,

we called enslaved Algonquians back in the day,
like that's legit. We show up. Okay. Straight off we violate

Habeas Corpus, *the law of nations, the rule*
of law over war. Our exceptionalism means we, too,

can kill innocents, or citizens, like Al Qaeda when
a *gleaming skyscraper became a tomb*. We went

a little crazy with the torture techniques: the waterboard, *Fear*
Up Harsh and *We Know All*, stuff we picked up from SERE. SERE:

the training we gave our good guys
on withstanding anti-law-of-nations types

in Russian Korea. Commies. Bad guys, what they do
to force a false confession out of you.

Monticello Visit

“Black life is cheap, but in America black bodies are a natural resource of
incomparable value.”

–Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

We love our country, all its fathers, times.
Jefferson and his best friend’s shared grave
under a favorite oak: pretty gay. Which is fine
with us. We worried they’d gloss over the slaves—
not mention the math he did on *their increase*, how
that all worked out. But then we see the place
is so small, everyone there must have known.
Getting Sally Hemmings pregnant? More slaves.
Smart baby slaves, fresh-bred to look like you.
I ask a docent which slaves he picked to sell.
Did he keep his kids? *He might have wanted to
but there wasn’t the money for it.* Right; *money.* Ah, well.
What he did for his country. What we do for ours.
What we think *family* means. And what money’s for.

Satan’s Cupboard

A morning with Athena,
the Boston Athenaeum’s on-line catalogue.

An afternoon with Mary, Assistant Reference Librarian. She points
out heads of the dead: hidden relief of Dante, hooded

Petrarch, dusty Shakespeare in the stairwell. *On your right,
here’s Jesus Christ; on the left you’ve got your Satan.* Christ:

huge with grace, forbearance, years across the hall
from Beelzebub. *He’s looking down on us,* says Mary, who should know.

I stoop, and see his placid brow is hairless. Lucifer’s
is out of bounds, unruly eyebrows of an old professor, cast out

by his wife. His line of sight is blocked by the King’s Chapel’s Library,

stately cupboard of books. Satan sneers, has always sneered,

at *Keith's Dispute with Quakers, Illustrations of More, Defences of More.*

During the renovations, he saw less than ever: dim interior of crate. Forgive

his bitterness: the prince of the power of air's now carved in marble. All this knowledge hanging, ripe, just out of reach. His chin cleft or cloven, hair

corkscrewed, tumbling forth
like a fountain, like

Athena herself from the forehead of Zeus. Mary says that during renovations the cupboard's shelves were misplaced, lost

a long time. *Where did they turn up?* I ask. She intercedes, asks Stanley. Satan, that old serpent, hid them under prints and portfolios,

under power of darkness. Untidy spirit, spiteful on the return of the bookshelves, books that Satan looks at: *More on Apocalypse, Sherlock*

on Death, Goodman on Sin. Lucifer, on his pedestal, is tempered by these neighbors, through with acquisitions. He would kill

to be their editor. He could suggest a few changes, hopeful new titles in the tradition of *Fowler on Christian Liberty,*

Stillingfleet on the Separation,
Defence of Snake in the Grass.

Poetic Research Statement

I use research in and for my poems all the time. Sometimes the poems are just an excuse to do the reading and travel I dream up. You read *Between the World and Me* and want to take those ideas to Monticello? You want to make notes the first time you get a tour of the Boston Athenaeum so you don't get lost? You want to read Jill Lepore's article on the history of torture closely enough that you can teach it? You're half way to a stack of poem drafts!

Sometimes research comes to the house, which saves time. The found text in "Law of Torment" arrived in my mailbox in a *New Yorker*. I started reading it in the steam room at my gym, then realized I was going to need those pages less soggy, and got out of there. When I started seeing rhyming couplets, I had the road map I needed to take it where I wanted to go.

"Monticello Visit," the sonnet for Jefferson and his boyfriend buried together under the oak a short walk from Sally Hemmings' cabin, comes out of my realization that Monticello is tiny, that everybody knew who was up to what

with whom. It's astounding how determined we have been *not* to know that the founding fathers, like so many other slaveowners, could be found prowling the quarters of enslaved people on any given evening. That it was OK to do it, just kind of tacky to bring it up. It's like how surprised we all were when Trump won, or Beyoncé lost; it's just too painful to remember what-all we already know about ourselves. So many chickens, so much roosting.

"Satan's Cupboard" features Mary Warnement. She's now the William D. Hacker Head of Reader Services at the Boston Athenaeum, and she's been my friend since I won a Mary C. Mooney fellowship there in 2001. Now I bring Boston public high school students in to look at manuscripts by Boston residents over the centuries to get them inspired to write their own personal essays. And I bring in UMass Boston MFA students to look at engravings of, say, the ruins of Palmyra, to start them thinking on writing, say, anti-ISIS poems. But this poem is from the first tour Mary gave me of the Athenaeum, back when she was assistant reference librarian. Back in the day, another time, when I was worried I'd get kicked out for wearing sneakers.

Stanley Ellis Cushing, the dapper Anne C. and David J. Bromer Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts, makes an appearance in this poem, too. So does my habit of admiring books for their titles: *The Complaining Millions of Men* and *My Cave Life in Vicksburg* were recent spines I took photos of. Stumbling across those, doing any kind of research in person, letting yourself drift into lucky breaks instead of traveling down digital wormholes—it's not as efficient, but holding real objects can help. My second book has a whole series of poems based on William Alcott's 1847 anatomy book for children, *The House I Live In, or The Human Body*. Its front matter is engraved with a skeleton knocking at a door, announcing "I am fearfully and wonderfully made!" Who isn't? Aren't we all?

This article originally appeared in issue 17.2.5 (Winter, 2017).

Jill McDonough's books of poems include *Habeas Corpus* (2008), *Where You Live* (2012), and *Reaper* (2017). The recipient of three Pushcart prizes and fellowships from the Lannan Foundation, NEA, NYPL, FAWC, and Stanford, her work appears in *Slate*, *The Threepenny Review*, and *Best American Poetry*. She teaches in the MFA program at the University of Massachusetts-Boston and directs 24PearlStreet, the Fine Arts Work Center online. Her fifth poetry collection, *Here All Night*, is forthcoming from Alice James Books.