

ESSAY SUSAN EDWARDS RICHMOND

AND
THE
STONE
WORD
FELL

POEMS FROM THE CREATIVE WRITING CLASS AT THE MASSACHUSETTS CORRECTIONAL INSTITUTION IN SHIRLEY

*And the stone word fell
on my still living breast.*

These words, which open the poem, “The Sentence,” by the Russian poet, Anna Akhmatova, served as one of our writing prompts my first season teaching poetry at the Shirley Medium Correctional Facility (MCI). No metaphor could make more vivid the voice of the jury ringing out a guilty verdict. Poems this assignment elicited are some of those we have held on to, those we keep to share with as many people as we can.

Tuesday mornings I strip myself of all worldly trappings – jewelry, keys, cell phone, money, identification. From the moment I step through the first of four electronic gates, I am cut off from anything outside. The “trap,” as it is called in prison parlance, is a portal in and out of the larger world. What lies beyond is a closed community, about which little is known and far too little curiosity aroused. I am here for a mere two hours

each week, but the students I teach live in this stripped-down world 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, most without respite.

There is not much of beauty behind these fences of chain link and coiled wire. Few things grow, except the dry grass of the yard and a few sparse border plantings tended by inmates as we walk past. Occasionally, a startling alights on the lawn, or a flock of geese fly over with their plaintive honking. Not a fertile environment for poetry, one might think. The landscape here, both exterior and interior, looks bleak.

But when Linda Hoffman invited me more than a year ago to join her in leading a poetry workshop at Shirley MCI, I did not hesitate. While pursuing my Master’s degree at U.C. Davis, I had learned about California’s extensive program of poets teaching in the prisons, and had thought about teaching inmates ever since.

I was not intimidated so much as apprehensive that these men would not believe I had anything to offer them, that

the trajectory of their lives had carried them beyond what I had to give. When I walked into the bare, sparsely furnished room that first day, however, I found the most serious group of students I have ever encountered. I was chastened by their earnestness and eagerness to learn.

Their attentive faces reflected the full range of ages and ethnicities. A number were not long past high school age, although many had never graduated. I learned later that one student, in his fifties or sixties, had been incarcerated since he was seventeen. In the interminable solitude of that time, he had taught himself about world mythology, the history of slavery and civil rights, and several major religions.

One young man, when asked if he had ever written poetry as a kid, responded, “I couldn’t even read until I was in high school. Not ‘cat,’ ‘dog.’ Nothing.” Yet here in prison, he churns out rhymed couplets, telling the story of a frightened child dodging beatings and escaping to the streets.