Resolution on the Death of Deborah Digges
Presented before the Faculty of Tufts University
May 13, 2009

On behalf of Lee Edelman, Chair of the Department of English, I would like to read the following resolution on the death of Professor Deborah Digges and to ask that the members of the Tufts community join us in remembering and celebrating the accomplishments of this remarkable poet, beloved teacher, and most generous colleague and friend.

Deborah Digges, who wrote two powerful memoirs—*Fugitive Spring*, a recollection of growing up as the sixth of ten children in a family of Southern Baptists living adjacent to an apple orchard in Missouri, and *The Stardust Lounge,* an account of rescuing her adolescent son from his involvement with drugs and gangs and guns—would have shaken her head with a rueful smile could she have read her own obituaries. Though the journalists may have recounted the facts, they missed, in the process, the life. Or, rather, they missed the intimate relation between the life and the language that transformed it. Deborah's enterprise, the work of her life in more than one sense of the phrase, centered precisely on that transformation: on the escape from the constraint of facts as mere counters, as tabulated data, as abstractions enumerated, like children in a family as large as the one she grew up in, without ever receiving the focused attention that the things of the world deserve. That imperative to attend to particularities led her to take up painting in her teens and took her on a journey away from Missouri toward what Wallace Stevens once described as "the ultimate elegance: the imagined land." But the imagined land that Deborah would discover by creating it in four books of poetry remained rooted in the specificity of the world and the landscape she was raised in, rooted in the tangle of familial relations, in the sensory insistence of the earth and its products, in the dreams of a child and her recognition of the power that came with taking the words of the world and making them speak in her voice. That's the insight she acquired along with her BA in English from UC Riverside; that's what she pursued with her masters in English from the University of Missouri; that's what she burnished with her MFA in Poetry from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. And that's what she taught her students at Tufts for the 23 years of her tenure in the English Department as a faculty member and poet in residence.

It would be easy to wax sentimental here, but Deborah's example forbids it. We must hold to the lesson she taught in the classroom as well as in her poems: that emotion can never be divorced from thought; that language is a way of thinking the world and of trying to dwell within it. Not merely description or "poeticizing," poetry, as Deborah always understood it, opens the wound of being, which is the wound of being at odds with oneself, the wound of being in language and therefore of always being *between*—between meanings no less than between meaning and sound, between past and present, between memory and experience, and ultimately between life and death. Though she received grants from the NEA, the Guggenheim and the Ingram Merrill Foundations, and though she was recognized for the brilliance of her poetry by the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Prize bestowed on her first book, *Vesper Sparrows*, and by the Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award that she won after publishing her third, *Rough Music,* Deborah didn't write

for the world's recognition; she wrote to recognize the world. Describing her mother's conversation while combing her daughter's hair, she wrote, for example, in "Darwin's Finches," the following memorable lines:

She said some birds steal anything, a strand
of spider's web, or horse's mane,

the residue of sheep's wool in the grasses
near a fold

where every summer of her girlhood
hundreds nested.

Since then, I've seen it for myself, their genius—
How they transform the useless.

That was Deborah's genius too: to take the seemingly useless things—the hairs in a brush, the stuff of a nest—and weave them into metaphors with the supple strength of a fine-meshed net to snare an errant truth. Those truths, she knew, aren't always benign. *Trapeze,* the last book of poems she published, confronts head on the pain she felt at the death of her husband, Franklin Loew, president of Becker College in Worcester and former dean of the Veterinary Schools at Tufts and Cornell Universities. But the inextricability of pain and loss informed her work throughout. "Some truths," she wrote in "Aubade for the Executioner," "possess one fate and one alone/ which is to tear their way toward death." She viewed life with what she called a "cold eye," but never with a cold heart. And she bestowed the warmth that came from her ability to see the world's wonder and brutality at once not only on her family, not only on her sons, Charles and Stephen, her stepsons, Tim and Andrew, or her foster son, Trevor; not only on the children in the Tumaini Orphanage in Kenya where she gave both her time and her love; not only on the countless animals she took in and sheltered and shared her life with; but also on the countless students at Tufts whom she taught to begin their own transformations by working the words of the world.

She taught them to think in images, to see the disjunctions in synthesis and the connections that no separation can ever undo. She taught them the weight and worth of words, the specific gravity of consonants, the eloquence of imperfection. And she taught them that a poet as distinguished as she could still be enthralled by a sophomore's poem or by the way a student's metaphor changes the afternoon light on the quad.

In "Ancestral Lights" Deborah wrote these lines, two of which found their way into an edition of the *Columbia World of Quotations:*

And though I know now that Heaven may be
only the mind's fear of the wonders it imagines,
the way our best thoughts surprise us
and seem not to be our own, I like to believe

we turn into light around those we love,
or would have loved, had we known them,
and warn them through the blood
by ringing in their ears.

For us at Tufts, where she was greatly beloved and where she gave so much love in return, she has now, as these lines anticipated, become part of the radiance that surrounds us, turned into the light of "The Light on the Hill." But if this is where we would like to end, on this note of consolation, Deborah's poetry—and her honesty—demand that we push a bit further: that we not scant the darkness her light aimed to show us. In her last class the Wednesday before she died, Deborah read aloud from Robert Frost's "Directive," which features this passage that reverberated so strongly in her own work:

Weep for what little things could make them glad.
Then for the house that is no more a house,
But only a belilaced cellar hole,
Now slowly closing like a dent in dough.

That sense of fragility, evanescence, and collapse always lingers, like anticipatory dust motes, in the light that Deborah bequeaths us. Which means that it isn't an innocent light, a light naively celebratory, unaware of the shadows that every light both creates and tries to banish, but rather a light aware of its burden—a light that knows the sadness embedded in what it has to show. That's why a better place to conclude might be with this moving passage from Deborah's "Rune for the Parable of Despair," a poem in which, as she often did, she rewrote those lines from "Directive":

I'd never known how quickly a house
can be taken back, taken down,
nor will I grant myself the balm—
though it's been centuries—
that I was "blessed" to see it turned inside out,
the furniture thrown through the windows, and the books
to lie face up, riffling, swelling, until the pages
emptied into a thousand seasons,

books that once possessed the magnet pull of stars!

That last line ends with an exclamation point, thus pointing to the survival of wonder even in the midst of devastation, betraying the galvanic pull of words still trying to order the world. We who have lost a colleague, teacher, friend, and a world class poet might heed the advice she gave and refuse the always inadequate balm of saying we were "blessed" to have known her. We might rather *keep trying to know her,* and thereby keep trying to know ourselves, by returning to the books she left us—books whose beauty and difficulty exert a magnetism that she rightly sees as the attribute of stars. Tufts, her family, and the community of letters lost a star when Deborah died, but in the words she

shared with her students and in the poems she shared with us all we can still feel the pull of her gravity and observe how the world still harbors her light.

We ask that this resolution be included in the minutes of the faculty of Arts, Sciences and Engineering, and that a copy be sent to Deborah's children, Charles and Stephen Digges.