

IN 1969 M. SUFFERED AN ILLNESS, lung-related, significant enough for us to close the bookstore. And thus fairly finished was the forwarding of her own work in photography, as well as the forwarding of the work of other photographers.

Not that our active life ended, not at all. M. would work for several years with a well-known writer, assisting in areas both professional and personal. I would, for some years, type his manuscripts. My job was hard; hers was impossible. M. also began, in 1976, a literary agency, finding publishers for some excellent books, and certainly she forwarded the publishing part of my life. But that was the least of it.

It has frequently been remarked, about my own writings, that I emphasize the notion of attention. This began simply enough: to see that the way the flicker flies is greatly different from the way the swallow plays in the golden air of summer. It was my pleasure to notice such things, it was a good first step. But later, watching M. when she was taking photographs, and watching her in the darkroom, and no less watching the intensity and openness with which she dealt with friends, and strangers too, taught me what real attention is about. Attention without feeling, I began to learn, is only a report. An openness — an empathy — was necessary if the attention was to matter. Such openness and empathy M. had in abundance, and gave away freely. All the years I knew her she had this gift, which is also sometimes a burden, with our life friends, with me, and with the

faces and even the objects that found their way into her pictures. I was in my late twenties and early thirties, and well filled with a sense of my own thoughts, my own presence. I was eager to address the world of words—to address the world with words. Then M. instilled in me this deeper level of looking and working, of seeing through the heavenly visibles to the heavenly invisibles. I think of this always when I look at her photographs, the images of vitality, hopefulness, endurance, kindness, vulnerability. Her world certainly wasn't daisies or birds or trees, as mine was; we each had our separate natures; yet our ideas, our influence upon each other, became a rich and abiding confluence.

Somewhere in my writings I have described how M., unfailingly, whenever I came home from a walk in the woods or the fields, would say, "How was it?" and how dear this question was to me. Reading in her journals this last year and a half I came upon the following entry:

Mary has just returned with yellow flowers
and a wet Luke who has been swimming in the
ponds. I always ask her for news. What does
that mean, what news am I looking for? Good,
I imagine. What I mean is news of humans.
Mary comes home with fox news, bird news,
and her loving friends the geese Merlin and
Dreamer, who are going to become parents
under Mary's eyes once again. How many years
has she been watching them? They come
running to her. That's Mary's news.

I don't think I was wrong to be in the world I was in, it was my salvation from my own darkness. Nor have I ever abandoned it—those earthly signs that so surely lead toward epiphanies. And yet, and yet, she wanted me to enter more fully into the human world also, and to embrace it, as I believe I have. And what a gift to read about her wish for it, who never expressed impatience with my reports of the natural world, the blue and green happiness I found there. Our love was so tight.

In all our time together we were rarely separated. Three or four times I went away to teach, but usually M. would come with me, and we simply made our home, temporarily, somewhere else. And, while I always loved the stillness I found in the fields and the woods, our house was a different thing, and I loved that too. We were talkers— about our work, our pasts, our friends, our ideas ordinary and far-fetched. We would often wake before there was light in the sky and make coffee and let our minds rattle our tongues. We would end in exhaustion and elation. Not many nights or early mornings later, we would do the same. It was a forty-year conversation.

The end of life has its own nature, also worth our attention. I don't say this without reckoning in the sorrow, the worry, the many diminishments. But surely it is then that a person's character shines or glooms. M.'s strength waned, over and over she met with some obstacle that might be called the-body-can't-do-it-anymore. She was cheerful during repetitive hospital stays; she was sometimes hilarious with visitors, wonderfully off-hand. "Oh," she would say, flipping her

hand as if scooting a fly, "it's just a little tumor." Her boat was still in the harbor and once in a while she would struggle aboard and have a good time, though a brief good time. To get out of the boat she contrived the only manner possible, she flung herself overboard into the shallow water, laughing, until we all laughed with her. Finally, she gave the boat away. Good lungs we need, and hers were failing. That is the way it goes sometimes, slowly. The vitality goes somewhere else into this world. And then the life.



A F T E R N O T E

How often now I just sit, with my
elbows on the desk and my hands
holding my face bold and upright,
and stare into the past.