



In life, as in her brilliant poetry, Deborah Digges wove together the earthy and the ecstatic

BY REBECCA KAISER GIBSON LECTURER IN ENGLISH

# Fugitive Soul

T

HE FIRST TIME I MET DEBORAH DIGGES, the late poet, memoirist, and professor of English at Tufts, I was peeved with her. What were we going to learn from someone who seemed so lightweight, so much at sea herself? She'd drifted into our graduate-level poetry classroom, her tawny hair in a loose French twist with falling ringlets. Her attire, bordering as it often did on the bizarre, consisted of lean black pants and a brocaded black jacket that hung like an oversized lab coat down to her knees, all of which made her slightness, her waifishness, more pronounced. Nothing in her demeanor—certainly not the sweet, heart-shaped face of her Dutch ancestry, nor the fluttery voice—hinted at her sudden fire, her wildly intuitive intelligence. I'd never have guessed that this wispy presence had been honored with the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Prize for the best first book of poems, *Vesper Sparrows*, or that her third book, *Rough Music*, would win the \$50,000 Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, the world's richest prize for a single collection of poems.

That first encounter took place in 1996. Deborah, recently divorced, was raising her two sons as a single parent, and now commuting from Amherst, in western Massachusetts. To cover the added expenses, she was moonlighting from Tufts

in Boston University's creative writing program, in which I was a student.

Deborah chose my poem to discuss first. It was a piece I'd written about the death of an Australian theater director I'd known. My poem, quite cleverly, I thought, used a number of Australian terms (swaggie man, humping bluey, shaky wattle hut, tippie) that seemed both to give a flavor of the man's country and to sound provocative. Deborah read the poem. "Too fast," she said, without hesitation, and without rationale. "It happens too fast." I was seething with the indignation—familiar to all students—of being misunderstood.

She was right, of course. The poem was not lived in, not felt. It pretended a suave detachment (I had titled it "This and That") which neither it nor I had really achieved. And Deborah, who could sense a poem whole, saw through the pretense. She was like a "poem whisperer," tuning into it, sensing its needs. There was no reference to theory or schools of poetry. Following her thought process required not only trusting her but relying on our own sense of the feel of the thing, and then finding words for it. What she was teaching, I realized, was a profound trust in oneself. Before the end of the term, I was a convert.

ILLUSTRATION BY GÉRARD DuBOIS

**A**FTER GRADUATION, AS I BECAME friends with Deborah, she seemed a wild spirit. When I first visited her in Amherst, I hardly knew what to expect. The house on Blue Hills Road, a low-slung white Cape behind a bedraggled fence, looked ordinary. Inside, however, was a different story. The living room was festooned with tiny treasures. The little nests, rodent skulls, moth wings, feathers, eggshells, and small porcelain objects were laid out on all surfaces, delicate miniature worlds enshrined in old Coke crates. It was as if a little girl's special things had taken over a grown-up room. How did she dust them, I wondered. Every room had a huge vase overflowing with lilacs. Deborah invited me to stay the night, even though there was no meal planned, no provisions.

Suddenly—I didn't even know they were there at first—three or four large adolescent boys came trooping up out of a basement door and into the fake Delft blue-and-white-tiled kitchen, with its red table full of cat food dishes. They said hello and tromped out the door, no permissions asked, nor demands made. I think there was some sharing of cigarettes between the boys and Deborah. Things just rolled from one moment to the next, in no particular order that I could see.

The windows over the kitchen sink were open, as they always were, for the feral cats to come and go freely. Various insects took advantage of the welcome. By then, Deborah, her son Stephen, and a foster son, Trevor, were taking care of a severely epileptic dog that required constant attention and twice-daily medication, as well as two other dogs, one of them intermittently aggressive, and a litter of nine kittens whose feral mother had been killed by a car. This was what ordered their otherwise unstructured lives together.

One encounters a similar kind of whirling, propelling complexity in Deborah's poetry. But in contrast to her life, her poems are constructed like built objects: line by line, there is dynamic tension, a balance between opposing forces, both technically—between form and content—and thematically. Sometimes she balances ancient ritual and everyday life, for example, as in the poem "Rough Music": *"shadows of the ancestors / circled my bed in their cheap accoutrements."*

Other times she balances the physical and the ethereal, as in this passage from "Winter Barn": *"what my love could give me / instead of children—the dusk as presence, moth-like."*

For all their architectural rightness, the poems are anything but static. There is "some kind of a suspension and updraft, which has to keep this thing up off the ground," Deborah once told an interviewer. In the case of "Broom," from *Rough Music* (opposite), what holds the poem aloft is the power of its syntax. By starting each of many stanzas with the phrase "more than," she urges the reader down the page in pursuit of what is more than *"my sixteen rented houses . . . / more than the kitchen door frames . . . / more than the ruler . . . / more than the height at which . . . / and more even than the high sashed window . . . / more than the locks left open . . ."*

Finally, we get the answer: *"more than all these / I have loved the broom."*

And just when one thinks equilibrium has been reached, she opens the dimension of what the broom means. It is not just the domestic tool, sweeping the debris of life over the threshold, cleaning yesterday for today, but the dance of the broom, the parting of this from that. And finally the poem lifts off: *"lost in the motion, / lost swaying up and down the whole length of your body . . . / gone in the motion, back and forth, sweeping."*

With Deborah, one was swept up in the physical moment. Take this small but emblematic scene: Deb showing me Emily Dickinson's house, near her own. Me saying, "Oh look, lilies of the valley! I love them." Deb responding, "Want some?" And before I could object, out of her car (filled with dog hair, books, bottles, cloth, papers, more books) came a cardboard box the right size for a generous dig-up of lilies. With her endorsement, it just seemed right that I have these flowers. She'd shown me in a single gesture how unnecessary were my years of dutiful self-denial.

That spontaneous act had its own history, as I learned when I came across a poem called "The Flower Thief" (see page 27), which she had published in *The New Yorker* several years before our lily heist. It's not a simple poem, entwining as it does so many interrelated strands: a landlord, a tenant, a parade, a wedding, a matador, the sea, an orangutan, and a

rampant array of specific trees and flowers. Here is both extraordinary vulnerability and powerful uplift. The flower thief herself often seems isolated, temporary, without possessions, and traveling ancient gypsy style. Yet the poem ends with transfiguration. The stolen flowers become the flower in the woman's hair, which grows "star white. Then she's gone."

It's possible to read this luxuriant poem a number of times without noticing, or even knowing, that it's a sestina. The sestina is a highly structured form—six verses of six lines each, then a three-line verse—in which the last word in each line follows a special pattern. The form helps her circle round the disparate elements so that each becomes a necessary part of the drama. As in all Deborah's works, there is an intense engagement with life in this poem. It is, among other things, about living richly in the intensity of the moment.

**D**EBORAH DIGGES CAME LATE and unexpectedly to poetry. Born in 1950 in Jefferson City, Missouri, she was the sixth of the ten children of Everett and Geneva Sugarbaker. The family lived at the edge of town in an apple orchard. Her father was a doctor with a cancer clinic and laboratory in town. Her mother, who is still living, briefly danced as a Rockette and then became a nurse.

Deborah was part of a movable banquet of kids playing in the orchard, exploring the convent that went up next door, tending to the mice in their father's lab. The children, as is often the case in big families, were treated in some respects as one organism. As Deborah wrote in her first memoir, *Fugitive Spring*: "At fast-food stands, our father always ordered for us ten hamburgers, ten bags of fries, ten small Cokes. There was a standard."

One difference between Deborah and her siblings was her inability to assist her father in operations. (She had, as she put it, "a habit of fainting.") Instead, she organized medical charts. "The pictures fascinated me," she writes. "I'd hold them up to the bright tube-lights and study the softened shapes. X-rays revealed the body as animal, ageless, save the white swirl in the lungs. The bowels, full of barium, looked

*Continued on page 26*

# Broom

*More than my sixteen rented houses and their eighty or so rooms  
held up by stone or cinderblock foundations,  
most facing north, with useless basements,  
wrought iron fences to the curb,  
beat-up black mailboxes—  
eagles impaled through breasts to edifice—  
or set like lighthouses  
some distance from the stoop a thousand miles inland,*

*or close enough to sea the sea gulls  
settled mornings in the playing fields I passed  
on this continent and others  
as I walked my sons to school or to the train—*

*more than the kitchen door frames where is carved the progress  
of their growth, one then the other on his birthday  
backed against the wall, almost on tiptoe—*

*and more than the ruler  
I have laid across their skulls  
where the older's brown hair like my own,  
or the younger's blond like his father's, covered abundantly  
what was once only a swatch of scalp  
I'd touch as they slept to know their hearts beat—*

*more than the height at which, and in this house,  
the markings stopped like stairs leading to ground level,  
and they walked out into the world,  
dogged, no doubt, by the ghost of the man, their father,  
and the men who tried to be their fathers,  
father their wildness—*

*and more, even, than the high sashed windows  
and windows sliding sideways  
through which I watched for them, sometimes squinting,  
sometimes through my hands cupped on cold glass  
trying to see in the dark my men approaching,  
my breath blinding me,  
the first born surely the man I would have married,  
the second, me in his man's body—*

*more than the locks left open and the creaking steps,  
the books left open like mirrors on the floor  
and the sinks where we washed our faces  
and the beds above which our threefold dreams collided,*

*I have loved the broom I took into my hands  
and crossed the threshold to begin again,  
whose straw I wore to nothing,  
whose shaft I could use to straighten a tree, or break  
across my knee to kindle the first winter fire,  
or use to stir the fire,*

*broom whose stave is pine or hickory,  
and whose skirt of birch-spray and heather  
offers itself up as nest matter,  
arcs like the equator  
in the corner, could we see far enough,  
or is parted one way like my hair.*

*Once I asked myself, when was I happy?  
I was looking at a February sky.  
When did the light hold me and I didn't struggle?  
And it came to me, an image  
of myself in a doorway, a broom in my hand,  
sweeping out beach sand, salt, soot,  
pollen and pine needles, the last December leaves,  
and mud wasps, moths, flies crushed to wafers,  
and spring's first seed husks,  
and then the final tufts like down, and red bud petals  
like autumn leaves—so many petals—*

*sweeping out the soil the boys tracked in  
from burying in the yard another animal—  
broom leaving in tact the spiders webs,  
careful of those,  
and careful when I danced with the broom  
that no one was watching,  
and when I hacked at the floor  
with the broom like an axe, jammed handle through glass  
as if the house were burning and I must abandon ship  
as I wept over a man's faithlessness, or wept over my own—*

*and so the broom became  
an oar that parted waters, raft-keel and mast, or twirled  
around and around on the back lawn,  
a sort of compass through whose blurred counter-motion  
the woods became a gathering of brooms,  
onlooking or ancestral.*

*I thought I could grow old here,  
safe among the ghosts, each welcomed,  
yes, welcomed back for once, into this house, these rooms*

*in which I have got down on hands and knees and swept my hair  
across my two sons' broad tan backs,  
and swept my hair across you, swinging my head,  
lost in the motion,  
lost swaying up and down the whole length of your body,  
my hair tangling in your hair,  
our hair matted with sweat and my own cum, and semen,  
lost swaying, smelling you,  
smelling you humming,  
gone in the motion, back and forth, sweeping.*

—DEBORAH DIGGES, FROM *ROUGH MUSIC*  
(ALFRED A. KNOPF, 1995)

like the meandering of a river.” With her talent for drawing and painting, she seemed destined for a career as a medical artist. That same clinical eye informs much of her poetry (“*a drowned bird opened cleanly / under my heel. I knelt / to watch the spectral innards shine and quicken,*” she writes in “Vesper Sparrows”).

Deborah tried hard to meet the social expectations of her family and the era—that she would “wait” for the man, marry, have children, and (despite failing miserably at home ec) be a homemaker. She also tried to fit her Southern Baptist parents’ expectations in religion. In church, she would throw herself into “going forward” for prayer, unleashing a flood of tears and an extravagance of Bible reading and personal exhortation. She took it all quite seriously.

Everything changed in high school, as Deborah struggled to differentiate herself from the organism of the family. She began to run with a “bad crowd.” By graduation, her grades were so low that her parents enrolled her not in the Christian college her siblings attended, Wheaton College in Illinois, but in Michigan’s Hope College, which had a program in anatomical art. She dropped out early in the term. Her parents’ next college choice—William Jewell, near Kansas City, Missouri—she undermined by skipping classes to be with a sadistic hippie/artist draft-dodging boyfriend. She flunked out with “the lowest grade point average” in the college’s sixty-year history.

Salvation appeared in the form of a kind boyfriend, an ROTC cadet named Charles Digges, of whom her parents approved. Deborah was married at nineteen and had her first son (also named Charles, and today an investigative reporter) by twenty. It was at Reese Air Force Base, in Lubbock, Texas—where her husband was doing pilot training and away much of the time—that Deborah wrote her first poem. Again she was trying to assert her own particular being. “Everything about our lives that year—from the empty tundra to the tract house we lived in, to the uniforms the pilots wore, and in their way, the uniforms of the wives—sought to efface us. . . . I suppose I meant to challenge that effacement. . . . What better way than to adopt a medium as silent, as cold, and as abstract as language.”

When pilot training was over, they moved to California, where Charles was assigned to fly C-141 transport planes, but the time apart from each other took its toll. With her son in tow, Deborah enrolled in the University of California, Riverside, and completed her B.A. They had a second son, Stephen, in 1977, but the marriage ended three years later.

Back in Missouri, Deborah went to graduate school in English at the University of Missouri-Columbia and then, with two children, on to the prestigious Iowa Writers’ Workshop. There she met the poet Stanley Plumly, whom she married in 1985. But that relationship, too, was hampered by distance and absence, and ended in divorce in 1993.

The crises Deborah faced with her second son during his difficult teens—a time of drugs, guns, and run-ins with the law—could be the subject of a gripping memoir. And it is: Deborah documented this period with bracing honesty in her second memoir, *The Stardust Lounge* (2001).

**F**RANK—FRANKLIN M. LOEW, then dean of the Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine (since renamed Cummings)—entered Deborah’s life after he read a *New York Times* review of her first memoir. That book was full of references to animals, beginning with vivid descriptions of the mice in her father’s lab. Deborah consulted with Frank about her household menagerie, and he supported her decision to keep Buster, the epileptic dog, as well as her efforts to help her troubled son. Indeed, it was partly by caring for animals, especially the ailing Buster, that Stephen managed to turn his life around. (He is now a professional photographer.)

I met Frank at Deborah’s house a year before their wedding in February 2000. I expected someone dignified. Yet here was this beaming Jewish man, a guitar slung around his neck, doing an Elvis impression. Deb greeted me in white jeans and a white t-shirt with the arms rolled up James Dean style. That evening in the living room, she danced to Frank’s crooning, nimble as a colt, her high ponytail swinging long and happy down her back. I understood why he was in love with the

frisky animal dancing in the room, even before I learned that his first work had been with horses. And I saw that, with him, Deborah could finally live her full and idiosyncratic life, sanctified by a relationship that would honor it and her.

At their small wedding, Deborah wore a slim cocktail dress with huge red roses on it. Frank was in a formal dark suit. The two of them, dressed up in convention, but not bound by it, in great big smiles.

But it was the start of a roller-coaster couple of years, a period that included Frank’s appointment as president of Becker College, in Worcester, Massachusetts, and dragged horribly on when he was diagnosed with a virulent cancer and suffered—in spite of a series of alternative treatments, a trip to Cuba, and the best medical care—a painful and prolonged approach to death. At the funeral, Deborah was dressed diaphanously in white, like a milkweed seed. Her voice, in spite of the months of driving from his hospital bed in Worcester to Tufts, worrying always about how he was, what crisis loomed—in spite of the horrifying ups and downs of the progress of the disease—was still light and husky at once.

Much of *Trapeze* (2004), her fourth book of poetry, takes as its starting place Frank’s illness and death, as well as her father’s. On the opening page she writes with the intrepid directness that is a hallmark of her later work, “Let me not turn away. What I am is all that I can carry.”

Frank died six years ago. Deborah was out of touch with me for much of that time. I’d hear only rapid summaries. She was off to Africa, where her family had started a medical mission, and she’d teach painting. Her new book was almost finished. These were little rope bridges tossed across chasms. Questions by email went unanswered for months, and suddenly I’d get one, full of enthusiasm and humor. “Go for it, Bec” she’d say. “Don’t let ’em get you down.” A year ago, she almost came out to visit me for the day, but cancelled at the last minute.

Shortly before Deborah died, I happened to be at Tufts when she was. We snuck off for her cigarette and talked a long time by the basement door of East Hall in the early April afternoon. We discussed her next book, reminisced about poetry readings we’d attended together,

planned readings for next year, compared notes about students we'd shared, talked about hairdos and about men,

my husband, her recent boyfriend. She mentioned her grandson, her dogs. I told her that I might be away next term. She

offered to teach my classes. We discussed titles for books, hers and mine. She said she thought her book of selected poems might be called *Sweep*. The conversation ambled on as if no time had passed, as if time had stopped for us.

Two days later, on April 10, 2009, Deborah was pronounced dead after a fall from the bleachers of the McQuirk Stadium at UMass Amherst. Lacking evidence to the contrary, the local police termed her death an "apparent" suicide.

In cases like this, people often attempt to sift through a poet's work for hints of intention. Though of course it is always possible to read evidence of preoccupation with death in a poet's work—or of falling—it is also useful to remember that a poet raised in a staunch Southern Baptist family of Dutch heritage who attended church for hours each Sunday for years of her childhood, with her parents and nine brothers and sisters, had a lexicon deeply imbued with the language of her religion, a religion much engaged with the notion of falling and the notion of rising.

I had a dream about Deborah the day after she died (not that I usually give credence to these things). We were being driven in a large, clean white car, a Cadillac I thought, over an intensely green, almost fluorescent, field. Deborah was wearing thin white pants and a summery crepe overblouse, not unlike the white outfit she'd worn at Frank's funeral. Her hair was its usual abundant amber self, wrapped in a graceful if haphazard way. Her arm was relaxed over the front seat as she turned to me in the back and with a slightly rueful grin said, "So much at stake in getting it right, eh kid?" And she smiled again, having called me by the nickname she often used.

I awoke strangely comforted, yet mystified. Did she mean I was too concerned with some irrelevant rightness, or that indeed there is much at stake in the attempts we make to see and say, fiercely, what is? That even if one fails, it is the aiming towards that transports one?

For me, getting it right involves ending with the last lines of Deborah's book *Late in the Millennium*: "some mortal ceiling / had just been torn a- / way and we can't help but rise / now and rise instead / of fall in the full / sunlight still clinging to the scaffolding." **T**

## The Flower Thief

*Who watches behind curtains her landlord counting his hundred  
or so jonquils, or fingering like a scout the dogwood's  
five or six snipped branches, knows the fugitive's  
lust for the wayward tea rose bobbing above the hedges.  
She's cased all winter the sidewalk gardens. She's gone  
at dusk among forsythia and lilacs, the curb-side gutters*

*petal-clogged, the tulip trees' sprung husks pouched as gutted  
fish. There the streets are littered with the blossoms of a hundred  
redbuds blown and drifting like confetti after the parade's gone  
by. As if she were a part of that great wedding and would  
greet them at the threshold, she clips the ripest from the hedges,  
and for herself a few studded golden sheaths, just a fugitive's*

*provisions, enough to set in jars on the leeward sills like fugitive  
fires along a bluff above the sea, the camps stone-cold, gutted  
by dawn, as clueless as the next, each bud anonymous, the donor hedge  
in one moon phase replete. Who'll know the difference in a hundred  
years or care she spends them all in rented rooms? The green wood  
tears away. Her hands are pollen-stained and dewy, and gone*

*at last are any traces of remorse, any self-promised penance, gone  
as the roses she once threw to an old matador whose fugitive  
soul she thought she'd always love and, grown up, someday, would  
come back to. Another year she'd stood before the shit-gutted  
cage of an orangutan, his floor a wash of how many hundred  
fuchsia blossoms he'd stripped from the hydrangea hedges*

*within reach. Now he scooped up petals like a miser—his hedges  
half-blighted—then washed his face in flowers, his eyes gone  
tired with wonder or forgetting deep in the scent, in one of hundreds  
of northern coastal towns where winter's long and summer's fugitive.  
So she runs, cradling her cache, clearing the bright gutters,  
and backs along a wall out of the streetlight and jumps the wooden*

*fences laddering the terraces sentried by oaks, beechwood,  
and sycamores. Their tufty seeds, miles away, swarm the asphalt hedges.  
Their rent, exhausted blossoms funnel down the harbor gutters,  
or drift, too light to sink, across the bay, like small armadas going  
home from some new world. The flags go up. Out on the fugitive  
horizon, the crew will not look back at us, the hundreds*

*waving from the shore, hundreds turning toward these gutted storefronts  
by the fugitive light, our faces pale as woodbine above the hedge  
of traffic. The flower in her hair grows seedy, star white. Then she's gone.*

—DEBORAH DIGGES, FROM *LATE IN THE MILLENNIUM*  
(ALFRED A. KNOPF, 1989)