

ANNE MCDUFFIE

Partial Inventory

I. NAMES

I'm never sure what to call myself. I've tried *assistant*, *personal assistant*, *organizer*. I've tried avoiding labels altogether and saying simply that I "work with" Madeline DeFrees, and I offer examples by way of definition: organizing her books and papers; housing her archive until I find a permanent home for it; pursuing the publishing projects we discussed when she asked me to take on this role six years ago. Madeline was nearing 90, but she still lived alone in the Craftsman bungalow she'd bought when she retired to Seattle in 1985. We agreed that it made sense to start right away, while she could offer me some direction and answer my questions. I wasn't the first person she asked or the only one willing to do it, but I was the youngest, the one who'd ostensibly have more time to figure it out. *Literary executor* is what she designated me in her will, though the name feels wrong to me, and sometimes, when I've been delving into her private papers, *voyeur* feels more accurate. Also, we tend to think of a literary executor as the one who takes charge of the literary estate after a writer's death—that's how Merriam-Webster defines the term—and Madeline is very much alive.

2. ORDER

For two years, I went to her house every Friday. We shared tea or a sandwich, talked a bit, and then I went down to her basement office to sift through the piles that had overwhelmed her meticulous filing system. I didn't fully understand my responsibilities but at least, I thought, I could learn what she had, and how to organize it. Her sewing room was filled with boxes that had already been inventoried and appraised, readied for sale to a university library, but there was more. In her office I found stacks of unsorted notes, letters, manuscripts, drafts, clippings, photographs, and books. Her file drawers were mostly full, her love of order such that she sometimes inserted blank empty folders to make the tabs line up evenly, left-middle-right, left-middle-right.

3. THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

When Madeline sold her house and moved to a retirement community, her papers came to live with me. Then she moved to Portland to be closer to family, and I took the library too. I stacked twenty-one boxes of books against my dining room wall, sorted as Madeline's bookshelves had been: living authors on one side, dead on the other. It was partly a memory aid—during her sixty-plus years of writing and teaching, she'd read, heard, met, known and taught so many poets that it was sometimes hard to keep straight who was still with us. And yet the first time I saw her move a book from a shelf on the left to one on the right—from the living to the dead—I thought I recognized a private ceremony. I watched Hayden Carruth and Deborah Digges take their places alongside T.S. Eliot and Robert Frost, and knew whatever legacy I preserved would be fractional, incomplete. It took me most of a summer to inventory her library. I leafed through every book, taking down the information required for appraisal, reading some, making my own notes on the experience—thoughts and memories, questions raised, an inventory of reaction. Then I shipped them to the University of Montana, where the living and the dead are shelved together in a special section of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Library they call the Poetry Corner.

4. UNEXPECTED GIFTS

Madeline and my father arrived to teach at the University of Montana the same year, 1967. She was 48. We knew her then as “Sister Madeline”—she hadn’t left the order but was living on her own for the first time and using her given name. She was one of my parents’ first friends in Missoula, and the last person I remember seeing the summer morning we left, in 1974. We were moving east for what we thought was a year, following a job that we thought would be temporary. Madeline arrived just as my father finished packing the car, with a shoebox in her hands and hugs for everyone. Inside the box were ten packages the size of my seven-year-old fist, wrapped in tissue paper and tied with yarn. She told my brother and me that we could unwrap one each day on the drive to Pittsburgh. We tore them all open before we reached the interstate, and I don’t remember now what was inside—probably the same small treasures she always saved for us, Snoopy pins with slogans about happiness, peace stickers, the tiny ceramic animals that came in boxes of Red Rose tea. What I remember is her face, bright with anticipation. I used to listen as she told my parents about her own treasures—the table she’d had made from the treadle base of her mother’s sewing machine, the hand-thrown pottery she loved. I’d never seen such untempered excitement in an adult, and could only assume these were magical finds. Later I realized that was when I’d begun to think of her as making her own category, an order of one.

5. HISTORY

Madeline protected her first paperbacks as she was taught to do in the convent—two scraps of cardboard slipped in front and back to fortify the paper covers, and a plastic sleeve taped over that. In the oldest books, I find penciled in or on a small typed, sellotaped label: “Ad usum [for the use of] Sister Mary Gilbert.” As nuns, they weren’t permitted to own anything, and referred to all items as shared. “We had to say such ridiculous things,” she told me, laughing, “‘I dropped our pencil.’ ‘May I have our book?’”

6. LINES

Everything is relevant to the lively intelligence that produces the poems. *Write it all down*, Madeline told me once. It was August 1996, and we were walking through a field outside the Padilla Bay Estuarine Reserve. She was to teach a workshop there the next day. I’d taken her up early because she no longer drove on the highway, and she hated to arrive late. She was 76. Outside the Interpretive Center she read every sign and made a few notes. That field reminded her of another, where she’d seen a sign that warned against disturbing nesting grounds, and the rhythm of its text so interested her that eventually it spawned a villanelle, “Keeping Up with the Signs.” *Meadowlarks nesting March to August...Do not walk in open field*. She confessed that she thought she’d changed one month for another; it sounded better. Maybe the birds weren’t Meadowlarks, but another breed—she’d have to check her notebook. I was just beginning to write poems of my own. Everything she said was relevant, and I tried to write it all down.

7. ASSOCIATIONS

Was it the winter after I began going to see her every week that she reread Robert Lowell’s *Collected Poems*? I won’t forget her reciting “Home After Three Months Away” at the kitchen table. She had to pull the book out to check a line; unusual for her, and I don’t remember now which one it was but she had it right. For me, the image of “our coffin’s length of soil” is linked

forever with that first November I spent helping her: cold, wet days that sank quickly into darkness. And the last line, which I felt drew her back to the poem after a terrible bout with shingles that had barely begun to lift by Christmas: “Cured, I am frizzled, stale and small.” But Madeline was actively tending her own lengths of soil then. As a gardener, she kept faith with what remained unseen in those winter beds, carefully prepared for the coming of spring.

8. GLIMPSES

In her essay, “The Radical Activity of Writing Poems,” Madeline writes “No matter how hard one may try to reproduce in language the way a poem springs into the light, much of its growth is tuberous: like that of the common potato, a major portion of its steady accumulation is underground and in the dark.” As I went through Madeline’s books, I found a yellow index card bearing, on one side, my mother’s address, and on the other, some crossed out dates and the line “skateboards, roller blades, the tides of disaster.” On a bookmark from Seattle’s Elliot Bay Book Company, she’d written, all in caps, “SWIMMING IN CATEGORIES.” I know what I love best about this work is the glimpses it affords of that hidden process, how I have the sense always of digging, digging, and now and then striking something solid, some root or growth.

9. QUOTES

I found pamphlets in her library, transcriptions of lectures given at the Library of Congress, and among them Anthony Hecht’s talk on pathetic fallacy. I always hear this term in Madeline’s voice because she taught it to me, pronouncing each syllable deliberately as if to engrave it on my memory. That’s a teacher’s trick, isn’t it, to give weight to the words you want your students to remember? I’ve always loved to listen to her voice on the phone. She speaks precisely and never rushes. She gives each word its due, even when the subject is trivial or she’s simply affirming something I’ve said. *Yes*. A letterpress voice, that leaves its impression on the air.

10. VOICES

Whenever I paged through a book and saw her little pencil marks in the margin, the bracketing or wavy line down the side of a paragraph, the check mark or double check mark beside something she liked and agreed with, I wanted to keep all the books so I could read and reread them, listening in on that conversation she had with them, and with herself.

11. POINTS

From an interview of Calvin Bedient: “The Keats for example that I loved was the Keats of the letters, not the poems, as much as I admire the odes.” (double check mark) “When I say I’m a romantic poet, it seems to me that I feel the human is boundless, and that seems to me the essential fact of Romanticism.” (squiggle down the margin) “One don’t is to never defend your poetry against anybody... [double margin line, double check mark] The other is never to follow the idea that got you to sit down and write the poem if the poem seems to be going someplace else,” (double check mark).

12. ARTIFACTS.

After years in place, rubber bands break, leaving sticky bits of themselves behind and greasy stains like shadows. Paperclips rust to the page. Cellophane tape turns yellow then orange, leaving rectangles of adhesive on facing pages like panes of stained glass. I read Madeline’s life and work through my own windows of memory, colored by all I know and all I have yet to learn.