

ISOTA TUCKER EPES

MS. FORD: This first one is a memorial to Isota Tucker Epes, and this was written by Blair Stambaugh with help from Perry Epes, her son; Stephen Piltch and Trina Vaux.

Isota Tucker Epes was born in 1918 and died on May 17, 2009. Her physical life was mostly conducted on the corridor between the sacred soil of Virginia and the environs of Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania, where she graduated from the Shipley School and Bryn Mawr College with a BA degree and Prix de Paris from Vogue Magazine. She returned to teach at Shipley from 1962 to 1965 and was the head from 1965 to 1972.

About her Shipley experience, Steve Piltch, current head of Shipley and member of NAPSG, wrote to her son, Perry, the following: "Your mother, who was born to be a teacher and an educator, was a truly extraordinary individual. She understood that 'the world was flat' and the importance of 'a whole new mind' before either Friedman or Pink were alive. Her legacy here speaks for itself. Bright, open-minded, and committed, she appreciated people as individuals and wanted everyone to thrive. Humble and caring, she made an extraordinary difference in the lives of many.

"Over the years, I enjoyed getting to know your mother, even a little bit. Whenever we had a conversation, she was interested and supportive. She wanted to be sure that the school was continuing to ask the difficult questions and doing whatever was necessary to meet the needs of our students and to prepare them for the complex world of the 21st century. Your mother embodied our mission and epitomized our motto: Courage for the deed; grace for the doing. Maya Angelou said: 'How important it is to recognize and celebrate our heroes and she-roses.' Your mother was one of my she-roses."

Trina Vaux, director of communications at Shipley, in this winter's Bulletin says, "Her tenure coincided with a turbulent time. Antiwar protests and the civil rights movement were in full swing. Mrs. Epes used them for positive transformation. Student government was rebuilt and made more representative, the dress code was brought up to date, and most transformative, and she began the move to coeducation."

Her academic life continued following her retirement from the headship. She received her MA in English from the College of William and Mary and taught at Hampton Roads Academy, Rappahannock Community College, and the Collegiate School in Richmond. Julia Williams, former head of Collegiate, says, "The girls absolutely worshiped at her shrine, knowing she was a superb teacher."

Following her retirement in 1984, Isota Epes took up painting, which absorbed her intellectual life for the rest of her days. Trained at the Virginia Museum, she expressed her passion for Virginia Woolf in her paintings, and also for the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, doing a series of monographs where she envisioned the poet's world.

Her son, Perry, best sums up her life. "Isota Tucker Epes loved to push the envelope, to stretch boundaries beyond their needless constraints on human happiness. She was never pious or doctrinaire. After her husband's death, she was often father and mother to my sisters and me. She kept on giving us life again, right up to the end of her own. She gave me a graduation trip with her to Ireland to visit sites associated with the poetry of William Butler Yeats. And I caught fire in this adventure, scrambling over stone walls and through dense brush to find the abandoned orchard where Yeats had counted 59 wild swans mounting up on their clamorous wings. My mother sent me off to my first year of college writing poetry of that song-lived place and time:

*Two swans hide their heads in the water.
Mother know, growing old, that your daughter
Loses no orchard, being born old.*

"I needed a rhyme for 'water,' and I did not hesitate to make my speaker's voice be that of a daughter. To be born again as my mother's daughter was not just the price of the experience, but somehow the very heart and reward of it, a synecdoche of the unbearable human reality that we children could never have all the life she knew, and a symbol of the unquenchable hope that she would offer it to us again and again."

Mrs. Epes is survived by three daughters, her son, and four grandchildren.