

## ARGUMENTUM

What was to be the value of the long looked forward to,  
Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity  
And the wisdom of age? . . .  
The serenity only a deliberate hebetude,  
The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets

—T. S. Eliot, “*East Coker*”

Why on earth would you want to learn Latin at your age?” incredulous friends ask.

I have a short answer and a longer answer. The short answer is because I love words and grammar. The longer answer is, I hope, more interesting and is why I wrote this book.

Hebetude, in the stanza above, comes from the Latin *hebetudo*, from the verb *hebeo*, meaning “to be dull, sluggish, inactive.” The *American Heritage Dictionary*, my lexicographic bible for this book, defines hebetude as dullness of mind, mental lethargy.

For thirty-five years, I’d been driven, constantly challenged, not only by my work as a New York editor and publisher, but also by class, competition, men, sex, motherhood, illness, and loss; by everything that is life in New York City.

At fifty-eight, I stopped working and retreated to the well-earned “autumnal serenity” of my country house in upstate

New York. But I was not serene. I was filled with anxiety. What to do with myself? How to fill the days, the weeks, the months, the years? I was lost in the woods.

My mother was the same age, fifty-eight, when the last of my siblings moved away from home, and I had watched this once industrious, gregarious, lively woman sink into depression, drink, and a feeling of uselessness. She'd lost her metier of running a family of six, and she hadn't the energy to pursue another. "I'm done," she'd say, again and again. I believe she willed herself to die at age sixty-six.

Why did I take up Latin at this late age? I did so not only to fight off hebetude, but also to avoid becoming my mother. I had no idea, when I began my studies, that rather than dead secrets, I would discover vital constructs that would illuminate my past as well as my present, and enliven my future. That I would conjure the dead language of my mother to life in me.