Laura Fasano Banfield
1915–2006
Remarks at her Memorial Service
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At the end of her memoir, *My Childhood and Girlhood*, Laura Fasano graduates from the Connecticut Agricultural College. There, we are told, the shy, introspective girl has gained self-confidence, and her native inquisitiveness has blossomed into a serious love of study and learning. Taking a research and teaching position at the Storrs Agricultural Experiment Station, she is warned that she will "have to deal with a lot of crusty old farmers who would not take a slip of a girl seriously." And then her memoir comes to this mysterious conclusion:

> After four very pleasant years during which time I was co-author of two articles in scientific journals—and during which I never had any difficulties with crusty old farmers—I left to be with my husband in a distant city.

Laura had no capacity for irony but a great capacity for amusement. I am sure that she knew this passage would amuse her friends, who would think that dealing with crusty old farmers was the perfect preparation for being the wife of Edward Banfield. (Indeed, Ed was once described in almost exactly those words by the *Harvard Crimson*.)

The two were a perfect couple. I first got to know them at Harvard in 1967. They were, to the few lucky students invited into their home, a life-saving port of traditional domesticity, friendliness, and discerning taste, in a dark and angry sea. All of that combined, of course, with intellectual seriousness of the most demanding kind. It was unsettling at first to observe that Ed, who did not set aside his sharp and contrarian mode of argument in the parlor or at the dinner table, never softened the blows when disagreeing with Laura on some point of politics or conduct or interpretation. Soon one realized that Ed was simply taking a slip of a girl seriously. And that Laura, who reports that hard

argument upset her as a girl, had accommodated herself to her husband's tough-mindedness: She would gently hold her ground, revise her position, or hold her tongue according to the circumstances and the merits of the case at hand. In the home they made together, critical argument was an aspect of high civility, apiece with story-telling and good humor, the cultivation of the mind and senses, long periods of silence reading and listening to music (in Laura's home, music was *never* background music), and, between the Signore and Signora of Casa Banfield, complete mutual devotion.

Many of Laura's and Ed's strongest character traits were female and male versions of the same traits. Laura, in common with her husband, possessed a cool and unsentimental understanding of human nature and a wonderful sense of the absurd; was deeply ethical, generous, and sympathetic in the Adam Smith sense of the term; was a keen observer able to derive large truths from small incidents or gestures that others would have missed; and had developed highly precise habits of thinking, speaking, and writing. Her collaboration with Ed on *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* produced one of the deepest works of social analysis ever written. In her years of work on what would be the definitive translation of Machiavelli's *Florentine Histories*, she would talk or correspond with Harvey Mansfield at enormous length over a single passage, sometimes a single word, to get the meaning exactly right from every possible angle.

But what was best about these talents to a friend was that they made Laura superlative company. On long mushroom walks in East Montpelier, bracing Fresh Pond walks in Cambridge, shorter Manhattan walks later in her life, or (here I am revealing our big secret) sitting around the kitchen table in East Montpelier sneaking a cigarette or two late at night after Ed had retired, Laura was a fount of great conversation—lively, original, edifying, and fun. On these occasions she was one's very own Jane Austen—focused on the particular rather than the abstract, with uncanny insight into human predicaments and the interplay of characters, and willing to render firm judgments even where family and close friends were concerned. Laura was of course utterly innocent of envy

or malice and incapable of gossip. Her tales were morality tales, told to explore the problematics of happiness and the nature of virtue and right conduct.

Incorporating all of these virtues, and towering above them, was a special kind of courage and heroism. When she was a young wife, Laura's husband sometimes had no money, no job, and no evident prospects. Several times during their ultimately long lives, both Laura and Ed endured health travails that were severely grave and painful. As far as I can determine, Laura never spoke a single word of complaint. In my own experience, her reports of big problems in letters and over the telephone were strictly factual and practical; if she felt that some editorial comment was called for, she would conclude with an "under the circumstances we are really fine, we're just fine."

She wasn't being stoical—there was nothing philosophic or even self-conscious about her courage. I think it was this: that her fascination with character and circumstance, and determination to derive positive lessons from every experience, extended to herself. Through all her years, Laura's greatest talent may have been her talent for steady contentment.