

Dear Toby



Joe Ashby Porter

In spring 1989 we met at Brown after a reading he had given, me a visiting writer in residence there. For the preceding six years, since his Pen Faulkner award for *Seaview*, I'd been in thrall, introducing students and friends to that novel, and reading his earlier ones and later ones as they appeared, so addicted that each new one commanded my whole attention until I could finish, late into the night. How dare he?, I wondered. I had begun to detect a kind of stalwart innocence in his fogs and tunnels, his handling of women, gays, and other mammals. In those days I didn't automatically check people's online images, so that probably I was seeing him for the first time at the reading. He looked like a saint and seemed to comport himself like one.

I'd met him just before his reading. After the book signing came refreshments and chat. I joined the small cluster around Toby, and he introduced me to beautiful Miriam, whose first remark was, "Aren't you the author of *Eelgrass*?" When I nodded she continued, "That's my favorite American novel." Young as I was, I did my best to take the compliment in stride. I stole a glance at Toby and found him smiling at the moment's slight awkwardness.

Years passed. My addiction to Olson fiction grew with each new book of his, and I also came to know and admire his poems. One

summer before Yves and I went to Paris we spent a week outside of Dieulefit in the hills east of Montélimar, in Bernard Hœpffner's book-lined house. While Yves explored outside on foot I mostly browsed and read including, wonder of wonders, an Olson novel I'd never heard of.

Around the turn of the century Toby came to Duke to read the extended latrine section from *The Blond Box*, to a small but select group, mostly unflappable students who made me proud. Around that time, or soon after, I learned of Miriam's Alzheimer's, and realized I might not have the unalloyed pleasure of thanking her again for her compliment, the highest I had (and have) ever received. Five or six years later, when Yves and I were spending a sabbatical year in Mattapoisett, Toby invited us up to Truro for a weekend. Miriam's condition had worsened but I resolved to thank her all the same, over the cookies Toby had baked, but it was not to be. The afternoon before Yves and I were to set out, we were blindsided by a speeding car, ours totaled, and we felt too rattled to drive anywhere. More years passed, Toby producing more and more wonders, including *Tampico* which I reviewed in these pages, even as he cared for Miriam until her perhaps merciful death this January. Now in the near term comes the collection of stories with the memoir.

Once I told Harry Mathews I thought I was in love with Toby Olson. Ever unflappable, Harry wondered whether I meant sexually. Probably not, I said. More something like adoration.