

Care as Metaphor for Love



Richard Wiley

In the New York Times Book Review a couple of weeks ago Philip Roth, in an interview originally given to a Swedish journalist, said, of the title character from his *Sabbath's Theater*, something like “Mickey doesn’t live with his back turned to death, the way normal people do.” It’s a paraphrase, but close, and close, too, to the way the novelist and poet, Toby Olson, has spent his literary life, and, we find out from his sublime short memoir, “The Other Woman”, his personal life, also.

In Toby’s novels, from *Seaview* to *Utah*, to *Dorit in Lesbos*, *The Woman Who Escaped from Shame*, and many others, there is a undertow — critics might say a subtext — of sickness and healing, of caregiving and the need for care as a metaphor for love. In some of these novels sexuality itself wears a nurse’s or a doctor’s uniform, with only the slightest curtain of decorum demarcating the difference between physical love and a love that is more spiritual.

Now, in his memoir, Toby is the nurse or nurse’s aid, the doctor or physician’s assistant, to a single patient, his beloved wife, Miriam, forty-six years by his side and withering away in every way imaginable from that scourge of a disease, Alzheimer’s. Toby’s memoir has the feeling to it of having been written quickly or, better stated, of having been given to him by his muses without the years of struggle that often go

into books of poetry or novels. It reads, though it's only some forty-six pages long (a page for each year of their marriage?) like other great works of art, like *Death in Venice* or even *Faust, Part I*, in that the fabric of all of our lives is laid out for us to view in a single sustained breath, like one might view a painting or a tapestry.

Miriam's fight is Toby's fight, her failures, his failure, but her successes, few as they are (or were, we must say now), seem to belong to Miriam alone. From the memoir's beginning to its end she is robbed of logical speech or control over bodily functions, most of the time, yet we feel privy to a fully-developed view of what her life was like when it was full, and it is beautiful, as was Toby's life with her, warts and all.