

Response to “The Other Woman,” by Toby Olson



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Alzheimer’s flat-lines narrative; there is crisis, yes, but no rising, no denouement, no arriving at an ending that unifies threads. I look for diagrams of narrative structure on-line and I find triangles. That’s at least two lines more than Alzheimer’s offers. Yes, there are stories within the Alzheimer’s narrative: there is loss of memory, loss of mobility, loss of personality, loss of words; there is (in most cases) the making of breakfast, lunch, dinner, the making of beds, the making of errands; and there is solitude within the company of another. “Falling inaction” might be the phrase for what the disease does to its host. Whatever action there is for the caregiver less resembles a Hollywood movie than it does a Zen monastery, where one sweeps, meditates, cooks, meditates, sleeps, wakes up. Or it’s captured in a two-minute video game, ALZ, categorized as “adventure.” This is the action of daily life at its most reduced.

Or at its most aware. Toby Olson’s story puns on its title. “The other woman” appears in confessional allusions to escapades with women not his wife, Miriam. But she has herself become “the other woman,” one to whom he can be emotionally faithful, because he is her caregiver, now “another man.” I am less interested in his confessions than I am in what happens on the 22nd page of the

memoir, here: “Now it’s suppositories once a week, on Saturday, and while Miriam rests for an hour, I walk down the paths and check the progress of the blueberries. There are thick patches of them everywhere, an early spring morning and overcast. A beautiful morning with no sun glint, and all the burgeoning green is vivid, various yellow wild flowers as punctuation. The berries are coming along, but it’s early and they’re not yet blue. It’s six o’clock and quiet, but for the rustle of a towhee in fallen winter leaves, a few sparrows chirping in scrub oak.” This is unmediated observation, the gift of seeing the world without intellect.

The last time my husband and children visited my mother she had recently been moved to an Alzheimer’s home in northern Virginia. We sat in the garden, my mother next to me on a bench, and she said, “look at the beautiful flowers!” They were yellow daffodils, I think. A couple minutes later she said, “look at the beautiful flowers!” And again. Then she left for the bathroom and failed to come back; we found her in the common room. My husband tells the story of how she forgot we were there, forgot where she’d been a few minutes earlier. But to me the story has, over time, become one of her perceiving beauty, noticing it afresh, iterated, always stunning, always there. This is what I read in Olson’s paragraph about what he sees after he leaves his wife’s side. He sees the world through Alzheimer’s, not despite it. It’s a world that undoes Stein’s notion that there’s no repetition, only insistence. This viewfinder gives repetition back its beauty. It gives it back as observation. In its grasp, one might say we are all Thoreau. Or, like Toby Olson, we come to organize our lives around suppositories and ping pong and these moments when the present comes to be illuminated as itself.

After I gave a talk on my own Alzheimer’s work in the History department at my university, a historian remarked that Alzheimer’s has come to symbolize memory in our time. It’s a backwards thought, the best kind. Yes, we are scattered, we wander through the digital busy landscape of our lives and increasingly we all acquire mild cases of dementia. But more than that (and beyond the remark he made), Alzheimer’s offers us, its witnesses, memories. Olson writes that “We’re still weighted down by the past. At least I am,” and many of his memories are beautiful, of being a couple with Miriam early and late. But then back to this other tense: “Cleaning and washing, her face and hands and those other parts, touching her ribs and knees, brushing her

hair. We are closer together in body than we have ever been. None of these moments is stored up in memory. Here we are. Here we will always be.” There is memory there, but it’s already generalized, lacking the drama of a particular instant. It’s non-narrative memory, which exists in a present-past, always the same—until the disease changes one of us, then both of us in our own ways.

There’s an achingly beautiful story in this memoir. It’s a story of redemption, not of the prodigal son but of the prodigal father. Olson’s father is dead, but while in the military as a medic he is given a patient to attend to. This man, Jack, suffers terminal cancer, but the younger Olson brings him back into the present, restores his features through physical care and conversation. It’s a way for Olson to reconcile with his father, four years dead. Yet, this story does not offer more; it is repetition. Reconciliation with father, by way of a substitute, is reconciliation with Miriam, by way of “the other woman.” Illness’s gift is to give us time, the odd luxury of care without the white noise of ordinary family relationship. My mother said once she was able to deal with me best when I was sick, because I was more loving then. Likewise with her: when she became my daughter, I could—over great distances—care for her, set up caregivers, lawyer, doctors, Alzheimer’s home, and hold her hand when I was in her presence, her and my present. Life was mediated by care, but not by anger, resentment, disappointment (though I now remember one exception, it might just prove the rule).

The part of Olson’s story that I find least successful is his attempt to get into Miriam’s head, to narrate from his wife’s point of view at the end. He interrupts the mystery, tries to conclude the narrative, offer the denouement of her voice within his own. It doesn’t work, but it matters still. The attempt to get out of our own still-churning minds matters. We see birds, flowers, body fluids, anew. They are what they are in this present that is a gift to us if we acknowledge it. We want to know what it’s like on the other side of the mirror, and we know it’s different. It’s the other. Ethnographers of illness, we use our imaginations to bridge that gap. We don’t find what we’re looking for, but that is the way such stories end. The resolution was there all along, in medias res.