

Book Review

Beyond Forgetting: Poetry and Prose about Alzheimer's Disease

Edited by Holly J. Hughes

(Kent State University Press, 2009, 247 pgs.)

Reviewed by Rachel Hadas

Poetry anthologies built around themes risk redundancy. From Grimm's Fairy Tales to the assassination of JFK, the first moon landing, the AIDS epidemic, or 9/11, all too often the law of diminishing returns sets in. In such anthologies a poem that happens to be more powerful or original than its numerous neighbors may stand out; equally, it may get lost in the crowd.

Yet there are good reasons for some thematic anthologies to keep appearing. Particularly if the topic is a painful one, the very making of the anthology—not just the writing of the separate poems that comprise it—serves a therapeutic purpose. Like the AIDS quilt or the public memorials that sprang up after 9/11, anthologies can be, if not precisely acts of mourning, then at least collective utterances. The sense of a common occasion and purpose mitigates the isolation of grief and loss. Anthologies built around trauma share some of the functions of support groups.

Beyond Forgetting, the latest title in Kent State University Press's estimable Literature and Medicine series, is

inevitably uneven and probably too long. Yet the sense of urgency which caused what editor Holly Hughes calls a "tidal wave" of responses to her internet call for submissions can be felt throughout this collection, as much in the often eloquent notes Hughes asked each writer to provide as in the poems themselves.

No wonder there was a tidal wave. People engaged in the long, lonely task of caring for someone with dementia are in desperate need of expression and connection. They need to make some sense of what is happening—to rage, to mourn, to remember, to somehow speak to the person who has fallen silent, to somehow recover the person who may live on for years but who is also gone. They need to ask questions that have no answer. All these difficult tasks are ones for which poetry is astonishingly well suited. If we want to speak to Alzheimer's sufferers, what better way than to apostrophize them in poems? And the patients' gnomic utterances fit better into poetry than into the prose of daily life. "As dementia took its course," writes Alice Derry in her note to "Rushing to Return," "my dad began to lose his words. I tried to be true to the ones he had left by using them in poems."

Furthermore, our quest to make sense of the jumble of gaps in the Alzheimer's world spurs us to ask questions, and here again poetry provides the perfect environment for anguished interrogation. Many memorable moments in *Beyond Forgetting* consist of questions. Here are only three:

Can one soul consume
another?

(Tess Gallagher, "The
Violence of Unseen Forms")

Who knows how the
mind files memory?

(Sean Nevin, "Again, the
Gnome and I Catch Dawn")

Is it easier to forget than
to remember?

(Arlene Ang, "Five Minutes
of Silence")

Finally, Scott Peterson's elegant poem "Finding Mother" could serve as a textbook example of metonymy—and metonymy is as good a way as any I know of for recovering the person who is gone.

She was inside
an old pocketbook,
the one she hasn't used
in ten years, since
she began to wander, and
we took her keys away...

There she is,
all of her,
before she disappeared
and became something else.

"Life's nonsense pierces us with
strange relation," wrote Wallace
Stevens in *Notes Toward a Supreme*

Fiction. Rooted in, sprouting from a heartbreakingly nonsensical realm, *Beyond Forgetting* is rich in all kinds of relations, relationships, and relating. On the lengthening shelf of books about dementia, it is an essential addition. ∞

Rachel Hadas's new book of poems is *The Aches of Appetite*. She is also coeditor of *The Greek Poets: Homer to the Present* (Norton 2009). A memoir about her husband's dementia will appear next year.