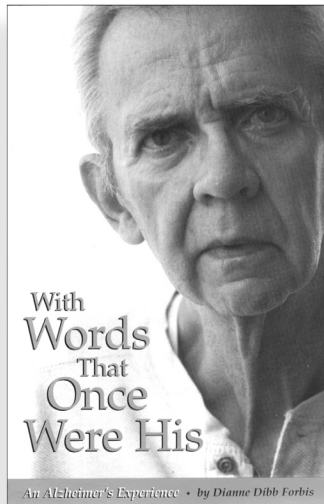


STARTLED TOGETHER:
A REVIEW OF WITH WORDS THAT ONCE WERE HIS:
AN ALZHEIMER'S EXPERIENCE

Scott Samuelson—Department of English

An essential pathos underlies seeing a mind self-destruct. Or as Dianne Forbis puts it in a particularly poignant poem in her book *With Words That Once Were His: An Alzheimer's Experience*:



your mind. . .
being unwired by
an evil assailant
called Alzheimer's.
I watched
and flinched
when you floundered
at putting things away.
Now socks under the bed,
the box of cereal with
the pots and pans,
your toothbrush in
the refrigerator
. . .
I watched until I had to start
Looking away.

The power of this books lies in Dianne's looking back again and again, and charting for us with unswerving honesty the dissolution of one she loves. The beauty of the book lies in the variety and artistry of that looking.

In poetry and
journal accounts,
woven together
in seven sections,
Dianne chronicles
her husband
Al's decline.

In poetry and journal accounts, woven together in seven sections, Dianne chronicles her husband Al's decline. Much of the energy of the book stems from the play among Dianne's poetic voice, her journal accounts, and the editorial links. The organization is simple and clear. Let me pause to reassure any who might find the thought of reading a book composed mostly of poetry a daunting prospect. While not lacking in artistry, these poems are accessible, as the example above illustrates. The interaction of the editor, the journalist, and the poet makes for both variety and interest. The poet soars, plumbs the depths, and strives to manage this horrific experience by verbal constructs—the chief rebuttal against Al's diminishing verbal and mental control. The journalist records the events, the details, the feelings in terms of inexorable time. Each journal entry is linked to a month, a day, a year, lending a temporal specificity and

reality to the accounts, insisting “This really happened, and this is *when* it happened. This is not imagination; this is *history*.” The editor—distant and objective—manages somehow to order chaos.

There is, of course, always a gap between experience and accounts of experience; what is lived and what is said about that living can never fully coincide. This book celebrates, laments, and embodies that gap.

In a preface of fewer than 400 words, Dianne introduces Al as a skilled word worker, a verbal designer. I knew Al well and have taken no small joy in verbal play myself, so I know that what Dianne says of Al’s gift is true: he knew how to rejoice in a pun; he was a master at word games. From the beginning of the book, it is clear that this is a work of painful celebration, a celebration of language and the power of writing to move in the direction of healing, as well as a commemoration of a life and a marital bond: “I honor and remember Al by tracing the tragedy of his decline in a wordsmith manner: poetry. I treasure the memory of my husband’s lucid years. I try to sort the bitterness of the terrible disease that took away Al’s precious words and a satisfying husband-wife relationship. The sorting brings some soothing. I clamor for whatever helps ease the loss. So I write.”

In With Words That Once Were His irony vies with pathos as the chief rhetorical mode. Certainly deep human heart strings are plucked by Dianne and Al’s losing battle to the evil assailant Alzheimer’s. It is certainly to the author’s credit that that sentiment never becomes sentimental. Honesty is her chief weapon against sentimentality, but a clear sense of irony redeems even the honesty. The chief irony is that as a gifted user of language declines to Alzheimer’s, that disintegration is most evidenced in his growing verbal loss. And Dianne chronicles and laments this loss, in her turn, with such mastery of language. Her prose is, in my opinion, at least as masterful as her poetry. At one point she tells of looking up November in the encyclopedia to see what happened that day in history and discovers that it is the birthday of John Philip Sousa. This fact links to the memory of Al’s having played Harold Hill in *The Music Man*. With great insight Dianne then exposes the workings of her mind, and probably the mind of all who grapple with life’s vicissitudes: “I vacillate between trivia and heavy emotional undercurrents.” The interest of the book for me lies largely in the fact that, conscious of this vacillation, Dianne gives herself to it and thereby rises above it.

It should be clear that the artistry of the book lies in large measure in the interplay of its parts, in the variety of combinations of its parts. For example, the prose plays against and with the poetry. The prose itself is a dialogue between journal entry and connecting commentary. A chief organizational impulse is the inevitable decline of Al and our view of Dianne’s various strategies of dealing with his slow mental death. Thus,

I try to sort the
bitterness of the
terrible disease
that took away Al’s
precious words
and a satisfying
husband-wife
relationship. The
sorting brings
some soothing. I
clamor for whatever
helps ease the loss.
So I write.

emotional response is set against history. The poetry finds itself in a refreshing variety of forms and tones. And for those interested in family dynamic, the central relationship between Al and Dianne is set off against their three adult daughters. These tensions and interplays add to the interest of the book.

I close with two examples:

From the journal entry for December 11, 1999: *He's forgotten his connection to me. I'm like a piece of music he used to enjoy greatly. The symphony of me never played sweetly for him for long. I always trumpeted too much, ripped up scores and thumped sourness. He who loved music so very much endured my dissonance. The wonder of it all is that he liked, yea even loved me in spite of my many squeaking notes. Oh, for that day when he'll be able to choose again to hear what he likes and loves. He's lost his ability to even understand buttons on the radio or tape player, disc player.*

It is not hard for us to understand Al's love of Dianne's symphony. The dissonance and squeaking notes is part of a sound so honest and true and artful that we come to look on them as the very texture of beauty.

Evanescence

Not like having an ice cube disappear.
Something much more chilling.

Imagine Mt. Rushmore dissipating
Not before your steady gaze but secretly.

You glance away momentarily, look back.
A few features slightly pocked, maybe not.

Another lapse in attention, then a check,
Sharp chiseled edge seems crumpled.

Soon whole rock facets vanish, fade.
Mounds powder, mass shrinks, grade slumps.

Treasured chunks sand to hazy evanescence
Like random buffaloes that once ruled thickly.

And I stand breathless, startled all alone
On a windy flat plain with no mountain.

I am grateful for this book that takes us with it across the windy flat plain of tragedy. The familiar features, sadly, dissolve; but finally, though we are startled by the loss of one friend, at least we are startled together. ☹