

Wilderness House Literary Review 21/1

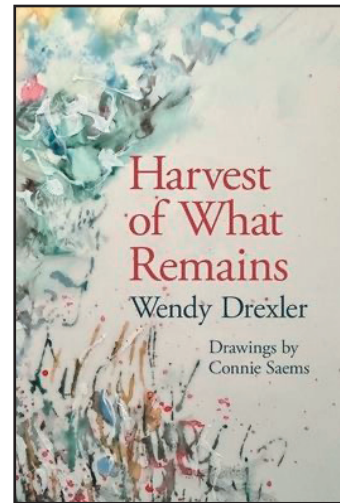
Harvest What Remains by Wendy Drexler

Interview by Doug Holder

Recently, I caught up with my fellow New England Poetry Advisory Board Member Wendy Drexler to talk about her new collection of poetry “Harvest What Remains”

From her publisher:

In *Harvest of What Remains*, Wendy Drexler navigates her intense journey as primary caregiver for her husband as Alzheimer’s wraps its great arms around them, irrevocably altering their relationship in ways that call upon depths of grief and survival strategies of dissimulation as well as the imperative to sow seeds of love and compassion.



No doubt, Alzheimer’s is a devastating disease. But even in life’s most dire circumstances, we can find beauty, maybe ugly beauty...in the situation. Your thoughts?



Yes, Alzheimer’s is indeed devastating and ugly, but there are many beautiful moments with a loved one. Perhaps the most beautiful gift has been my growing capacity for tenderness and compassion. For example, when we were getting haircuts together and I was helping my husband put on his coat, a woman in the salon came over and asked if she could “step into the middle of this love.” When you are so important to someone, when you are “his person,” you play a very sacred role in their life, and while it’s a very demanding role, there are definitely blessings

to be found that are deep and beautiful.

This may be a strange question. Could there be a sense of discovery in the disease. We all eventually go back to our childlike state. The question is—since your husband was slowly losing his memory, and you reintroduced him to things—was there a sense of wonderment for him?

Yes, definitely. Alzheimer’s silver lining has been (at least for me, as I can’t speak for my husband), that as his memory fades, rendering the past a jumble, and the future disappears in vagueness, he lives increasingly in the aspirational present, making connections with nearly everyone he sees, stopping to chat with strangers, complimenting someone on her bright sweater, enriching their lives and well as mine. Time is no longer a rush to accomplish anything. It’s a very Buddhist insight: “Nowhere to go. Nothing to do. Present moment. Wonderful moment.”

You capture a moment in the poem, “In the Kitchen,” watching your husband’s confusion as he tries to navigate around it. I imagine each day is a string of banal events that lead up to oblivion. It sort of like watching a dour Beckett play, each day wondering what the “Endgame” will be.

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Actually, cognitive decline is so incremental and the day's challenges are so great that it takes your full attention and energy to be a caregiver. I rarely think of the end game. Especially in the last year or two before my husband went into memory care, my days were consumed in a state of nearly constant vigilance to keep him clothed, fed, safe, and as happy as possible. And I had, and greatly needed, a lot of help from a wonderful caregiver. And there are different stages of the disease, and in his case, an earlier stage of anger and frustration at feeling controlled, which was extremely difficult. No one likes to lose autonomy and yet one neurological aspect of the disease, stemming from changes in the brain, is that someone with Alzheimer's is not aware of their own decline. This is called anosognosia. I found that it was a constant challenge learning to respond at each stage of the disease, to learn not to argue, to accept that I could not control or stop the progression, to develop greater patience, along with skills such as the telling "fiblets," and to feel satisfaction when I handled an exchange successfully. So life has definitely not been banal. In the acknowledgments in my new book, I write, "While I fervently wish you had never developed Alzheimer's, the other side of having to endure it has been my ever-deepening compassion--in that, you have been my teacher."

In your poem "At Hansen Farm" you freely engage your senses with nature, and the sweet pleasures of ice cream. Has your experience with your husband helped you to seize the moment or savor the moment more than you previously have?

I think I've been inclined toward trying to savor the moment for some time, and of course, writing poetry is a kind of paying attention. Trying to savor moments with my husband is a practice in lowering my expectations, for example, taking a deep breath when he hasn't taken a shower, that he's only half shaved, because we are on our way to a family gathering and he's just said, "It's so wonderful to see you!" I have to constantly remind myself of his limitations, of my tendency to become impatient and to have too many expectations, and to try to appreciate his pleasure at seeing me and our being together.

Has writing this collection been cathartic for you?

Definitely. The poems in this collection have been written nearly simultaneously to the events as they've taken place, in the heat of the moment. Writing these poems has enabled me to reflect on my experiences and process my emotions; to legitimize my anger, grief, and fear; and to find greater compassion for myself and for my husband. I have a number of poems I call "Reconstructed Sapphic Fragments," in which I've taken fragments of poems by Sappho, translated by Ann Carson, and written around the fragments. Then I erase the first poem to create a second poem, an erasure of the fragment poem. Both the reconstructed fragments and erasures have surprised me in that I seem to be offering myself advice and consolation. For example, in "Reconstructed Sapphic Fragment 83," I write, "Carry me, oh tide, let me try to give thanks." That's the advice and consolation part. And in the erasure of this poem, the distillation is "night again turns time to tanks," a surprising image I would never have found if not through erasure.

I've also really enjoyed my creative collaboration with Cambridge visual artist Connie Saems, whose drawings and cover art grace the book.

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To see my words transformed into letter drawings is inspiring and takes the poems to another level of richness and meaning.

Is poetry a sort of caregiver for you?

Definitely, that's a beautiful insight!

Why should we read this book?

To quote Rosalynn Carter, "There are only four kinds of people in the world--those who have been caregivers, those who are currently caregivers, those who will become caregivers, and those who will need caregivers." Caregiving touches everyone's life. I hope this book will be a source of solace and greater understanding for those who've already shared this journey and will provide insight to those who have not yet experienced the challenges and rewards of caring for a loved one.

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How to Make Even a Little of It Slow Down

At the hot pot restaurant, we dip kabocha squash, sweet as candy, into miso broth. Lotus root dense as meat. I scald my tongue, trying to eat too quickly. That impatience again. These days,

I can't listen to any more sad stories. Thank goodness on the Nature show the endangered pangolin on the island of Taiwan made it into the protected forest and found a mate

before the end of the breeding season. That the adorable African bush baby, abandoned by his pregnant mother, escaped the snake and the hostile bush babies and was able

to travel six miles in five days to the outskirts of Praetoria where a friendly pack of bush babies welcomed him, and suburbanites had laid out bananas on platforms linked

by ropes strung between trees. The bush babies mashed bananas all over their happy faces and gamboled among the ropes and trees. At the restaurant, I grab the clam

you are about to eat raw and toss it into the hot broth. I have to watch out for you all the time now. You couldn't hear my conversation with D and G across the table. So sweet

how you start talking to our waitress instead, teaching her muchas gracias and buenos dias, asking her for a placemat to write down sentences so she can talk with Latino kitchen staff

and customers. How to say La comida está muy magnifico! Quieres un poco de cerveza? She tells us she's from Laos and she squats right next to you beside our booth.

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She smiles a lot. Let's say I've never seen a waitress stop to talk to a customer for so long. Let's say we need more hope, more bush babies who find new families and new homes.

More protected forests. More treetops and more mashing our happy faces with kabocha squash. Let's slow it down over a meal. Let's savor the lotus root and the bok choy

and the wrinkled cabbage leaves
we'll learn to let cool long enough
we won't burn our tongues.

—first published on Autumn Sky Poetry Daily

*Wendy Drexler is a recipient of a 2022 artist fellowship from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. Her fourth collection, *Harvest of What Remains* received honorable mention for the Paul Nemser Prize and will be published in February 2026 by Lily Poetry Review Books. Her poems have appeared in *Barrow Street*, *J Journal*, *Mid-American Review*, *Nimrod*, *Pangyrus*, *Prairie Schooner*, *The Sun*, and *The Threepenny Review*, among others. She was awarded the 2025 E.E. Cummings prize from the New England Poetry Club. A recipient of the Juror's Prize for Art on the Trails, Southborough, MA, in 2021, Wendy served as poet in residence at New Mission High School in Hyde Park, MA, from 2018-2023, as programming co-chair for the New England Poetry Club from 2016-2024. She currently serves on the Club's advisory board. Her website is wendydrexlerpoetry.com.*