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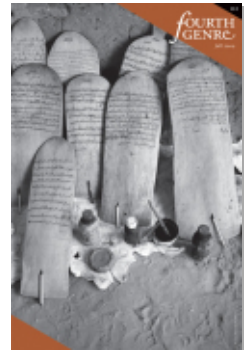
from Brenda Serotte

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Fourth Genre: Explorations in Nonfiction, Volume 11, Number 2, Fall
2009, pp. 175-177 (Review)

Published by Michigan State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/fge.2009.0000>



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the water, where tracks show the presence of bear. She ends the chapter in a crystalline image: “Undisturbed and not disturbing, I stood still breathing in sphagnum’s mossy sigh quiet after loon calls, followed unmarked paths left by stars too wild to show themselves anywhere but here, inhaled the nursing musk, the bear I knew was there.”

We leave the narrator there, in the presence of danger, in this “delicate moment laced with fear,” the thrilling beauty created from the encounter of opposites. We don’t know the outcome, but we suspect the narrator emerges unharmed—and transformed. With this image, we then embark on Shumaker’s journey of injury and recovery, a process in which she will also encounter her deepest fears and be changed by them. Sometimes this kind of story can only be told with a great deal of space to hold us. One deep breath after another.

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At my mother’s funeral, my grieving brother told me: “You’re luckier than I; no matter what happens to you in life you can *write* about it.” What he really meant was: And you’ll be comforted by your own words. It’s not unnatural to assume that in times of sorrow the writer can grab up her pen and find solace, or at least catharsis in the act of composing. But what if that were not the case? What if there were no words to be found anywhere, inside or out?

Comfort: A Journey through Grief

ANN HOOD

W. W. NORTON, 2008. 160 PAGES, CLOTH, \$19.95.

Ann Hood’s 2008 novel, *The Knitting Circle*, deals with exactly the same subject as her memoir, *Comfort*: the death of a child. But the memoir goes a step further; it is also a touching portrait of the author as mother, and how, from the trauma, she lost her ability to read and write.

Hood was, literally, rendered wordless after her five-year-old daughter Grace died suddenly from a virulent form of strep. After reading the novel, I was drawn to the memoir to see how Hood could write the same story in a different genre, and also to find out how she lived through it, really. “When I tried to read, letters no longer formed words, and words did not make

sentences,” Hood writes. “Instead, each page held a jumble of letters that meant nothing, no matter how hard I stared.” But the need to make sense of our lives, to *understand* through stories, remained: “In the days and months that followed, I told these details [of Grace’s death] over and over to anyone who would listen. Repeating them made the story, which seemed unbelievable still, real.”

Solace happened when Hood learns to knit: “Slowly, words began to return to me. I still struggled to read a book, or to write a page. But every day I picked up my knitting needles. I cast on, counting my stitches.” There is a happy surprise for the reader at the end of this often heartbreaking memoir, as the author/mother “swim[s] to the other side of grief.”

An Exact Replica of a Figment of My Imagination: A Memoir

ELIZABETH MCCrackEN

LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY, 2008. 192 PAGES, CLOTH, \$19.99.

“Closure is bullshit,” Elizabeth McCracken states at one point in her memoir, which also is about the loss of a child—one who was never alive. The author’s first child, a son, was stillborn, and McCracken frankly illuminates what that situation really implies: the sad and gruesome facts concerning giving birth to a dead baby. You carry it for the full nine months, you feel it move inside you, so you and your mate know for sure it’s alive, and then you bear it, finally, because you have to, even though you’ve learned it has died.

Is the fetus considered a child, a person, if it never lived? Stillbirth is a netherworld to most of us, but to McCracken and her husband their baby was very real, a human being, whom they lovingly referred to as “Pudding.” This is a poignant, engaging tale, told with wit and dry humor, especially when McCracken describes her surroundings in a remote part of France—she and her husband spoke only “passable” French—during and after the ordeal: “In the hospital in Bordeaux one of the midwives looked at us and asked a question in French [which] means, Would you like to speak to a nun? But Edward heard: Would you like to speak to a dwarf?” Reading this chronicle abroad, pregnant, one might jump on a plane for home immediately: “Everything about our winter in Savary feels dire . . . the house is gothic, dirty, the Anglophone friends we made perpetually and depressingly drunk and broke.” And even months later, “A single sentence in French can make me sad.”

What consolation? For a writer: words. This time words—other people's words—failed, as few knew what to say or write to her. "Even the words, *words fail*, comforted me," and she looked forward to receiving any condolence notes from anyone. This is a bittersweet memoir—bitter at first, sweeter toward the end.

Unpacking the Boxes: A Memoir of a Life in Poetry

DONALD HALL

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN HARCOURT, 2008. 208 PAGES, CLOTH, \$24.00.

Donald Hall, poet laureate of the United States, 2006–2007, seemed never to be without words his whole life, especially after tragedy. His candidly stunning memoir, *Without* (1998), about the death of his beloved wife, the poet Jane Kenyon, from leukemia, at age 47, is written entirely in poems and reads like a prose narrative. It was published just three years after her death. This new memoir is a more conventional, linear autobiography of Hall's life, not only in letters, but in place and time. Words of love for his wife, dead now 13 years, still emerge as poetry in these pages: "Love's island provides a standard that nothing in adulthood can quite live up to, something always sought, sometimes glimpsed in brief restoration, secured only by my wife Jane."

The next-to-last chapter of this memoir, "Grief's House," again deals with the topic of their love and her death, and its beauty is further evidence of Hall's immense gift of expressing the deepest, most private feelings on paper. The rest of the story is the author's coming up in New Hampshire and Connecticut, the son of a dairy farmer and a mother who had a secret eating disorder that nearly killed her. Hall insists that, in his childhood, "Nothing happened," and he repeats those words a few times in the book, but then writes of his mother's emotional death—hardly a non-event: "Much of my poetry has been elegiac, even morbid . . . her withdrawal from the years of singing in my ear left me imprinted with loss. After the first death there is no other."

Those of us who adore words will love reading Hall's views of his craft and his coming-of-age as a poet: "Poetry was sensual by its nature . . . in its carnality of sound. Poetry is more erotic than fiction." Hall is asked once, by a fellow Boy Scout, "Do you write *poems*?" And is thrilled when the boy adds: "It is my profession."