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from Brenda Miller

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READER-TO-READER: CAPSULE REVIEWS

This column invites readers to share their favorite nonfiction books in print. Memoirs, travel writing, nature writing, essay collections, biography, and true adventure are all welcome in these capsule reviews—both of new books and of old favorites still available. Our aim is to keep the best nonfiction alive in a reader-to-reader kind of way. If you have books that you'd like to recommend in this column, contact Mimi Schwartz at Mimi.Schwartz@att.net.

from Brenda Miller

About seven years ago, I began to study and practice Ikebana, the Japanese art of flower arrangement. *The Book of Flowers* (kind of the Ikebana bible) describes it this way: “Ikebana is an act of space—the space between branches, the space between flowers and leaves, and the space between masses. In other words, the space between flowers and branches comes alive.”

Each Ikebana class proceeds the same way: we sit for a minute in silence, to gather ourselves, and then our instructor, Charles, reads a short passage from *The Book of Flowers* that will set the theme for the day (my first day it was: *Simplicity is never a simple task . . .*). Charles demonstrates, holding up one branch then another, snipping a little here and there, setting the main lines of the piece, and then filling in with color. He makes it look easy, but “simplicity is never a simple task . . .”

Then we're set loose to try it on our own. We choose our branches, eye the flowers, try to discern the strong curves or lines, and snip away anything

that gets in the way. As we work, Charles roams behind us, nodding gently, arms crossed, stepping in just at the right moment to articulate what is happening in the arrangement. “See how these two branches are talking to one another?” he might say, or “See how the space comes alive if we snip off this twig?” The challenge is always not to do too much, to resist the impulse to fill in all that blank space with color or line. We need to trust emptiness, to allow space to do its work. “Ikebana is a world of encounters,” the *Book of Flowers* says, “. . . always facing the flowers with candor and listening to what they say. The heart must open wide to do this . . .”

I may have been drawn to the art of Ikebana because in my writing and reading I’ve always gravitated toward prose that uses white space and silence as central elements, essays that allow some breathing room. Like Ikebana artists, these authors trust space, and they know when to shut up and allow silence to do its work. I’m thinking in particular about Bernard Cooper’s *Maps to Anywhere*, Abigail Thomas’s *Safekeeping*, and Peggy Shumaker’s *Just Breathe Normally*. In each of these works, the white space is like a voice all its own, allowing room for the reader and writer to really encounter one another, to breathe, to settle, to reverberate.

Maps to Anywhere

BERNARD COOPER

THE UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA PRESS, 1997. 160 PAGES, PAPER, \$22.95.

Bernard Cooper’s *Maps to Anywhere* is a collection of miscellaneous pieces, many of them short-short essays of one or two pages. In them, Cooper approaches topics from barbershop poles to spin-art machines with a voice steeped in wonder and whimsy. He begins in the small, physical details that lead us into emotional territory that takes us by surprise.

For instance, “Capiche,” whose first few paragraphs paint an intricate, but “fictional,” picture of an idyllic afternoon on an Italian piazza, ends in a revelation and an offering, a long sentence that startles:

The Chianti sun was coming up, intoxicating, and I was so moved by the strange, abstract trajectories of sound that I wanted to take you with me somewhere, somewhere old and beautiful, and I honestly wanted to offer you something, something like the prospect of sudden love, or color postcards

of chaotic piazzas, and I wanted you to listen to me as if you were hearing a rare recording by Enrico Caruso. All I had was the glass of language to blow into a souvenir.

The narrator's breathless urgency to convey his complex and effusive joy is followed by a short but stunning "offering": a "glass of language" that has been exquisitely filled. We now have this "souvenir" to carry with us wherever we go. It is a fragile one, yes, and easily breakable, so we must surround it with the batting and insulation that white space provides.

Safekeeping: Some True Stories from a Life

ABIGAIL THOMAS

ANCHOR BOOKS, 2001. 192 PAGES, PAPER, \$13.95.

Now that I'm thinking about it, many lyric essayists present us with small, fragile gifts of all sorts. Abigail Thomas's *Safekeeping: Some True Stories from a Life* unfolds from just such an initial offering. The book is, as the subtitle suggests, "some stories," both *from* a life and that *create* a life. She traces the history of herself through a history of her three marriages, an introspection triggered by the death of her second husband. And she does so in snippets that accumulate into a comprehensive picture. The entire second chapter of *Safekeeping*, titled "Offering," is one single paragraph, set in the middle of the page:

While you were alive the past was a live unfinished thing. Like a painting we weren't done with. Like a garden we were still learning to tend. Nothing was set in stone yet, and weren't we ourselves still changing? We might redeem our past by redeeming ourselves. I had in mind a sort of alchemy. But then you died, and just like that, it was over. What was done was done. Now we could never fix it. All I can do is chip away, see what comes off in my hand, look for a shape.

White space surrounds the paragraph, creating a small island. Paired with the title, "Offering," the words seem literally "offered" to the reader in the narrator's cupped hands. She writes short, fragmented sentences as simple as an Ikebana creation, each line "encountering" the ones around it and creating

something new. There is nothing superfluous, nothing inessential. She even creates a sense of space *between* lines: “Like a painting we weren’t done with. Like a garden we were still learning to tend.” We move from one image to the next, but with a slight pause, mimicking the mind’s (and the breath’s) rhythms. She ends in a metaphor that articulates what she will be up to here: “All I can do is chip away, see what comes off in my hand, look for a shape.” Throughout the rest of the memoir, she enacts this “chipping away,” and we, the readers, peer over her shoulder as the bits and pieces assemble themselves into a story of complicated love and grief—a story that simply could not be told any other way. It’s all she can do.

Just Breathe Normally

PEGGY SHUMAKER

UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS, 2007. 278 PAGES, CLOTH, \$24.95.

Peggy Shumaker, in *Just Breathe Normally* (her memoir of recovery from brain injury), gives her reader a similar “offering” in order to start her fragmented story. While on a bicycle ride with her husband in the familiar territory of their Alaskan home, Shumaker was hit by a boy recklessly driving an ATV. She awoke in a hospital, in unfamiliar territory, with no memory of the accident and with only limited memory of her own life. Her memoir mimics the process by which her memory returned: in slivers. The starting point for this narrative offers us a single scene that seems unrelated, but that provides a metaphor for her entire experience. Titled “Just This Once,” it is just two paragraphs long. It begins:

Once, in a wild place, I felt myself quiet down. I listened, drew silent breaths. It was dangerous not to warn the bears I was there, no question. But I wanted to live one moment in a wild place without disturbing the other creatures there. This delicate moment laced with fear—a life wish.

Shumaker offers us this suspended moment in time—a quiet moment in which she “drew silent breaths.” The entire scene is infused with space, with silence, with the beautiful tension created between beauty and fear. “Just this once, I told myself. Everyone else snored. Black nets billowed, let in a few mosquitoes.” She leaves the cabin and quietly walks toward the edge of

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.

from Brenda Serotte

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.”