WATER~STONE REVIEW

HAMLINE UNIVERSITY
Graduate School of Liberal Studies

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WATER~STONE REVIEW

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Book Review

Abundance of the Short Form

MARY CAPPELLO

The Most of It
by Mary Ruefle
Wave Books, 2008, 95 pp., $11.95, paper

American Romances: Essays
by Rebecca Brown
City Lights Books, 2009, 163 pp., $16.95, paper

The Age of Virtual Reproduction
by Spring Ulmer
Essay Press, 2009, 97 pp., $13.95, paper

Short form, nonfiction romance, epistolary collage. None of these genres really does justice to the unique achievement of new books by Mary Ruefle, Rebecca Brown, and Spring Ulmer, but they at least encourage disquieting disquisitions on such. Two decades ago Richard Howard introduced Bernard Cooper's *Maps to Anywhere* (Penguin Books, 1992) by describing the contents as "neither fictions nor essays . . . [but] samples of a domain of user-friendly chromatics [that] vary greatly in length and intensity" (xi) and that captivated Howard by the "odd autonomy of [their] invention" (xiii). The same could be said of the uncategorizable prose pieces that compose Mary Ruefle's *Most of It,* but with an emphasis on that wiley rubric betokened by the little phrase "the short form." So, too, do Ulmer's and Brown's relatively short books fit this short-form type.

The problem (which is also the pleasure) of working inside short forms is that there is no such thing as *the* short form. If I read or write short, I eke out a particular aesthetic of the form either by identifying a tradition I have reason to be in conversation with, or by answering the question: what calls me to the short form today? Robert Walser, Roland Barthes, and Lydia Davis are among my favorite practitioners, but in each case the form emerges out of different

aesthetic, philosophical, historical, or linguistic demands. Walser's prose pieces are, he wrote in his *Selected Stories* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1928), "nothing more nor less than parts of a long, plotless, realistic story . . . a variously sliced up or torn-apart book of myself" (1). The pieces (neither fiction nor non) included in the variously reprinted *Stories* are rooms, even micro-scripted cubbies, and they are roams, small spaces within which Walser's mind travels. Walser's miniatures bespeak an anti-heroic sensibility as if "in response to his acute feeling for the interminable" (viii), according to Susan Sontag, writing in the introduction to *Selected Stories*, but they could just as well be understood as etchings in step with and against the grain of death's stop-time: see Walser's aphoristic coo, "Death makes its work brief" (116). Roland Barthes, Sontag reminds us in *Where the Stress Falls: Essays* (Picador, 2002), "preferred short forms, and his books tend to be "multiples of short forms rather than 'real' books, itineraries of topics rather than unified arguments" (69). I have before me Barthes's *A Lover's Discourse*, subtitled *Fragments*, but in the first five pages he delineates this particular book's short form by theorizing the differences among a fragment, a figure, an image repertoire, and an argument.

Is a fragment always a token of a missing whole—genre's longing—or can the parts enjoy a relation among themselves, unbeknownst to a bigger picture? I always want to imitate Lydia Davis—who doesn't?—but the copy inevitably fails, and maybe this is because her short forms are so complete without being sealed. Neither rooms for roaming, experiments in temporality, nor faux taxonomies, Davis's shorts *(Almost No Memory, Break It Down, Varieties of Disturbance)* are complex equations, knots—psychic, social, and linguistic—puzzles, inimitable logics for which there is no code but only her style.

And where do we find ourselves in the short order(s) of the twenty-first century? "Status lines are too short for me" tends to be my Facebook status line; I do not care to tweet; and I continue to miss e-mail's shorthand boat—I almost always use the new modality to write "real" letters—which generally makes me a terrible e-mail correspondent. If I find it impossible to plug into the brevity of Facebook's status lines, what is it I'm not getting, or am refusing, or feel disabled by? Is the twenty-first-century short form a means to micro-managing the self? Or is the trouble the fact that a status line is not a "short form" at all but only a form of abbreviation? Still, status lines and other digitalities are bound to change the shape of sentences, so we might have to invent a new short form that tweaks

the space between the Internet's insistence on pithiness and the opportunity it affords for endless chatting. We can idealize aphorism as a form to slow us down in the age of the Internet's presumed speed (and I certainly have), or consider how, in their attenuation of the moment, tweets and status lines actually do, in their way, slow time down rather than speed it up—they fool us into believing that a minute is more accommodating of experience than it really is.

What can happen that is otherwise unavailable to us in the name of prosaic compression? Do non fictive short forms have to conform to the prescriptive truisms of a poetry in which "every word counts"? Why not exploit the bedeviling catch and release of the ever-hovering attention that some prose affords in which words produce an atmosphere and time apart from counting?

There is no such thing as *the* short form. What excites me about the current mo-ment of nonfiction prose is a collective celebration of cross-genre imagining, yet how many contemporary writers have the courage really to experiment? There are a spate of new books made up of seriated two-line units, or short bursts that aren't exactly paragraphs, sequelae that are sometimes numbered and sometimes not. Sometimes their writers call what they are writing fragments, but not always. Most of the time there is neither a clear aesthetic nor a politics driving their expression, and the form seems entirely arbitrary. Such books are also often imitative of each other even as, given their refusal to admit of history, they pretend to be inventing the wheel. New nonfiction prose forms seem to spring up in the space between what we need, what's available, and what we are willing to invent. The imaginative work entailed is integrative, multivalent, and challenging, and we can find it in the authentic experimentation of Mary Ruefle, Rebecca Brown, and Spring Ulmer.

The Most of It is Mary Reufle's first book of prose in a career that has produced ten books of poetry. What brings the book under the aegis of prose, however, has nothing to do with an opposition to poetry per se (several of the pieces could easily be lineated, are image-driven, metaphorically engendered, etc.). It's the interdependency of the pieces that establishes *The Most of It* as a prose work. Stylistically, the book represents a miscellany, and even though single pieces yield a wish-to-be-read-out-loud pleasure, they feel as though they need each other in order to work: a reader has to read all of them for the power and distinction of the book to come through, much in the way that an essay needs all of its paragraphs.

If you are looking for a personal essay or a memoir, you won't find such here, which doesn't mean the book doesn't offer a commentary on existence. Part of the power and lure of this kind of writing is that it releases the writer and reader from an attachment to the idea of the truth of the self; we read *The Most of It* not for an expression of a self but for writing as a vehicle to self-investigation. In fact, some of the pieces are interested in a type of *thinking* self (irreducible to a state of mind)—for example, the "snow-mind" (13) or the "bonsai brain," where "there is no branch so old, and none so small that from time to time it doesn't do something peculiar" (13). Insofar as the book as a whole pictures a kind of thought machine, I'd describe its book-mind as deeply recessed and vaulted but beneficent, ebullient, and funny, simultaneously gorgeous and weird. "I needed to open the refrigerator—the water I wanted was there, sitting inside a glass pitcher on the uppermost grill, cold and clear and perfectly suited to my thirst. But I was afraid of the light, the light that went on whenever I opened the door" (24). This is how "A Glass of Water Begins," and it goes on to sketch an ontological dilemma that could serve as a metonym for human fear in general and at the same time a beautifully particular and particularizing fear.

If in conventional prose we want to know what happened next, in *The Most of It* the prose turns on what the narrator noticed next. Many of the pieces orchestrate a complex play of attention and distraction. Their pleasure is in a novel step, turn, or twist. Sometimes the pieces rely on playful circumlocution, and they are especially not interested in fulfilling any lurching toward sentiment. You might start out experiencing thralldom, but the piece will undercut that in no time flat.

Such is the example of "Woman with a Yellow Scarf," which could be read as a companion piece to David Antin's talk-poem, "Lemons." Antin's poem plays with the untoward moment in a piece of writing by Stendahl in which the word "lemons" suddenly appears; Ruefle's piece describes a reader stopped in her tracks by a sentence in a book she is reading: "a woman passed holding a yellow scarf over her head" (26). Where Antin's poem arrives at a poignant meditation, however circuitous, of his mother's memory loss, Ruefle's sentence containing the woman with the yellow scarf yields a fabulism that pushes any trace of sentiment off the grid of the page, for the "errand" Ruefle ascribes to the yellow-scarfed woman ends with the image of her concealing somewhere on her body "the tip of a forefinger wrapped in a bit of yellow fur inside a white leather ring box, and that the finger was mine, I had used it to follow words, for words seemed to me

to be always walking alone at night, even in broad daylight they were walking alone at midnight, and I confess, yes, I shadowed them" (28).

Many of these pieces do and undo themselves, lace and unlace. Partly because of the slenderness of Wave Books's books, the pieces feel like vertically inscribed panels, but the writing, too, in its continuous revision of itself gives the sense of an unfurling scroll. The tremendously delightful lead piece, "Snow," moves like a trail and a trill, a begetting without pause, utterly natural and unexpected, measured and spontaneous and hilarious. Sex and death come together in "Snow" but not as bedfellows, the way we're used to finding them. Starting with the humorous spark of a sentence, "Every time it starts to snow, I would like to have sex," the piece finds its way to adjacent snowscape imaginings that include birds in snowstorms, and cemeteries in which the dead lay buried beneath the snow "falling with such steadfast devotion to the ground" (15). "Snow" accumulates toward a portrait of sex (in winter) neither boisterous nor loud—instead, sex as a trope for isolation and silence.

"Camp William" begins in the voice of a camp counselor: "This morning I want to talk a little bit about killing" (16). "A pet is a good way to tell time" is the opener for "My Pet, My Clock" (19). "My father was a diary farmer and I grew up on a diary farm" (that's not a misspelling) is the first line of "The Diary" (57). And then there's my favorite first sentence: "I do not believe that when my brother pierced my skull with a succession of darts thrown from across our paneled rec room on the night of November 18th in my sixth year on earth, he was trying to transcend the notions of time and space as contained and protected by the human skull" (45). Each opening launches a piece like a high heel caught inside a crack in the sidewalk, matched only by signature endings that sometimes work as commentaries and sometimes as amusing and surprising non sequitors: what is this, we might ask, but an instance of a form inventing itself? Which isn't to say that invention and originality happen in a vacuum. I'd swear there are traces here of Lydia Davis and Robert Walser: from the Walseresque distinction between thinking and dreaming to the Davisesque meditation on the status and purposefulness of mottoes. Will someone greet me and if so, what then? Ruefle and Walser both ask. Is Ruefle's "Trick or Treat" a gloss on Walser's "The Man with the Pumpkin Head"? And in what sense can Davis and Ruefle be understood to be inaugurating a new brand of twentieth-century American philosophy of inner sanctums and suburban interludes?

One doesn't wish to measure or weigh one piece against another in *The Most of It,* and yet one piece emerges as a centerpiece. Entitled "A Minor Personal Matter," it charts the dilemma of a poet who thinks she can't write or teach poetry anymore. Without explaining a turn to prose, the short could serve as a meta-commentary on the book itself. Then there's "If All the World Were Paper," which doesn't seem misplaced but did appear in the special issue of the *Seneca Review* devoted to the lyric essay. Rather than defending any particular version of that limpid phrase, Ruefle supplies a meditation on the relation between ephemera and abundance, the tightrope walk between what will pass and what will endure, what is of the moment and what is too much with us. Finally, "The Most of It," as title piece, truly stands out as absurdist high point par excellence (and I realize that's redundant, but this is an extreme art): it's about an aunt who wrote large, who was writ large, literally. She's a fairy-tale figure, like the old woman who lived in a shoe, but less sinister. She made letters so big that children could loll inside of them, and reading one of her letters required the full force of an entire neighborhood. We could say her handwriting required a different reading method, just as *The Most of It* promises to make better, different readers of us all.

"I / Think about / Saving the day / I / Was born in / A hat / Determined to fly / Sum-moning / Paint. / Ignited by impulse and inquiry, / Charm/Knocks— / Chases / falls, / Seems to / Leave a child alone / While I am gone outside of the frames. / In World War II Paris / Sought refuge / In children's books." In my experimental nonfiction class this semester, graduate student Erin Vachon gave us a series of "blackouts" to critique. As beautiful visually as they were literally poetic, they were inspired, Vachon explained, by Austin Kleon, who appears for the time being at least to compose nothing but. Beset by writer's block, Kleon decided to find words rather than produce them. Armed with a black Sharpie and *New York Times,* he set about working by redaction to discover the poems caught inside the newspaper's sentences. One of the beauties of the blackout form is the way it offers access to an unconscious insofar as the resulting combinations have the feel of something that one could not write if one tried. "Reduce rather than build, then watch what emerges" could be the blackout poem's motto. Readers of Kleon might already be aware of precedent-setting examples of the form—in particular, Tom Phillips's *Humument* and Thomas Johnson's *Radios*, both published in the 1970s.

Situating itself almost exactly midway through Rebecca Brown's *American Romances,* an essay entitled "Extreme Reading" explores her own experiments with this approach, except her templates, like Phillips's and Johnson's, are books rather than newspapers, and she appreciates the politics of defacement in a way that Kleon's newspaper erasures don't. Blacking words out, of course, puts us in mind of "traditions" of government censorship, and though Brown doesn't explicitly address that aspect of the practice in "Extreme Reading," her book is, in other chapters, directly concerned with the (in)visibility of queer art and longings—in other words, what is erased because it is considered untenable, unacceptable, or taboo. Although "Extreme Reading" isn't the strongest essay in this brilliantly original collection, it puts her book in touch with another book by Mary Ruefle, *The Little White Shadow,* and highlights a move that is more subtly orchestrated in another part of *Romances.*

In *The Little White Shadow* Reufle works from a found book of that title which she proceeds to white out rather than black out, which she shadows rather than corrects. Watercolor shadowing rather than erasure is the effect of Ruefle's book, a short volume, the original of which might have dealt with mourning the loss of a young girl. Kleon and Brown seem more interested in finding texts secreted in an original than in holding a book up to the light and drawing an outline around the shadow its words cast. Subsequently, Kleon says he is looking for his "self" in the newspaper, just as "Extreme Reading" exemplifies Brown's attempt to find the words she can't access to grieve the loss of her parents. Kleon erases the potentially subversive effect of his work when he benightedly reduces it all to a search for himself (that idiom Americans never seem to tire of), insisting that "if you read my poems, you know who I am." But Brown, though she also appears to be searching for herself in her blackout experiments, is not interested in writing as a predictable mirror to some predetermined real. Nathaniel Hawthorne on the American Romance is Brown's primary interlocutor, and her book begins with an excerpt from Hawthorne's anti-mimetic preface to *The House of the Seven Gables.*

Hawthorne's aesthetic distinctions between fidelity-driven novels and imaginative romances serve as a foundation for the inventiveness of Rebecca Brown's collection, but the particular architectonic of her essaying is hinted at in her blackout work, or what she calls "extreme reading." Via cutting, pasting, and "severe editing," Brown discovers an "entirely other book" inside the one discarded and

found, just as her essays are themselves structured to yield an essay inside the essay inside the essay, or an essay alongside the essay alongside the essay.

Oriented around numbered notes which, though they physically follow the essay proper, trouble any easy ascription of foreground and background, antecedent and precedent, sub- or super-script, the essays in *American Romances* question epistemological priority and thwart sequence in a Po-mo sort of way. Rather than merely comment on the sentence to which they refer, the "notes" reform the page into deep space or ever-widening gyres of essaying. So, tucked inside notes to an essay on Brown's being nostalgic even as a child is a separate essay on Hawthorne's relationship to his children inside of which is lodged another essay-as-field-guide to misfit kids in American arts and letters.

Brown is perhaps best known as a fiction writer, but in this collection of nonfiction she writes sentences so musical as to be iambic, and creates juxtapositions that astonish and amaze. In place of exposition and in spite of what appear to be footnotes, Brown stages connections and lets her subject morph and meld into prose pieces as historically exacting as they are imaginative. The lead essay, simply entitled "Hawthorne," turns on an ingenious and audacious apposition of Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Beach Boys's Brian Wilson, who was born and raised in a California suburb called "Hawthorne" and who composed "Surfer Girl" while "driving in a car on Hawthorne Boulevard" (20). Mapping Wilson's and Hawthorne's periods of self-imposed exile along the route of a Puritan urging that pushes Westward until there's no place left to go, Brown discovers that "Hawthorne, writer from the east, and Hawthorne, suburb in the west, are twisted in a Mobius strip: the child and its evil twin, the maker and its son. The City on the Hill became the suburb in the sand" (11).

How Brown's essays arrive at their unexpected destinations is something to behold. In a brilliant and playfully instructive *tour de force* called "The Priests," Brown moves from playing a game of "priest" with a childhood friend (they used Necco wafers and Kool-Aid for Communion) to the twelfth-century Cathars or Albigensians, who might have been opposed to procreative sex but weren't averse to sensual pleasure, who were persecuted for their iconoclasm and might be understood as queer forebears. Into these interesting narratives Brown weaves a kind of history of the ingestion of crème wafers with or without transubstantiation. There's ecstasy to these essays, and rapture, and the shape of the route Brown takes us down is maze-like, so we might wonder why she chose to use the

numbered note as form repeatedly in the book. One time it's original; more than that exerts a tendency; at worst, a program that tames what's wild here.

Still, such formal tensions also give the book its charge. As an analogy-making jamboree, *American Romances* pursues full-tilt a portrait of the twenty-first-century artist groping for meaning, especially amidst contemporary forms of violence. An index of numerous, strange forms of punishment authored by the Puritans appears in a note to the lead essay. The list slips, slides, glides, and suddenly disrupts, a historically, into the present via the inclusion of methods of torture used at Guantánamo Bay. When something similar happens later in the book, it's hard to tell whether the urge to make connections has rendered historical difference meaningless, or if, under the pressure of the need to find similarity in seemingly disparate things, American Romance turns nightmare.

Meaning is an effect of our novel arrangements of the material our culture gives us. Of this *American Romances* is sure. An essay is one part accident and one part craft, just like you and me. Shall the American essayist opt for realism's sunlight or the romancer's moonlight (in which fact and fancy intermingle)? Such are the terms that Rebecca Brown's collection grafts one onto the other, undermined only by their "gonzo" aspect: the reliance just when the essays broach their boldest, most authoritative insights on a lingo breezy and hip, a lexicon of "creepy," "shitty," and "fuck" as if to say what's experimental and unfamiliar lacks authority and needs to be defended against lest we find here an original voice. But that defense is, no doubt, an index of the times in which we live and ultimately serves to quicken the pulse of an already highly charged prose.

"I want to be unframed by the violence around me" (69). In a book-length essay of just eighty-seven pages—a collage of "brief histories of," "atlases of," and "ages of," parts of which are rendered in the second person, like letters—Spring Ulmer arrives at this bracing keynote to *The Age of Virtual Reproduction.* What keeps us looking into screens, at representations of punishment and atrocity, at once real and unreal, and how can we respond from elsewhere? Ulmer's first book of prose (she is also a poet and photographer) is a deftly turned meditation on ethical engagement and regard, the space between witnessing and responding, beholding and accounting for, writing not just *of* but *to* as a form of political action. Like Brown, Ulmer re-inspires a poetics of the essay, but her analogies are of a different order. More contemplative than playful, Ulmer's echoic juxta-

positions bridge the near and the far: geographic, psychic, personal, and political. Where Ruefle's shorts invite absurdity, Ulmer's examples report the preposterous: "Near the end of the cold war, the Pentagon developed a use for all the depleted uranium waste being produced from nuclear power plants and in 1991 fired 320 tons of this waste on Iraq, and then twelve years later dumped another seventy-five tons there . . . Douglas Rokke, a military member in charge of the first Gulf War cleanup, states that in order to clear any radioactive waste site effectively, the site must be packaged up like a Hershey's kiss" (82).

Ulmer's book seems struck from the same source as Sarah Kofman's spare Holocaust memoir, *Rue Ordener, Rue Labat* (University of Nebraska Press, 1996), and Claudia Rankine's unclassifiable prose work, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely: An American Lyric* (Graywolf Press, 2004). Ulmer achieves the same purity of language as Kofman, that "lucidity unclouded by insight" that Kofman's translator Ann Smock describes (xi), and, like Rankine, she makes possible a kind of truthtelling by way of understatement, exposing without being expository. Less interested in "expressing" feelings per se, Rankine and Ulmer investigate how we are interpellated to feel, to mourn, or to (be)numb.

I was bowled over by the beauty of Ulmer's sentences, a beauty that is neither compensatory nor aestheticizing of suffering but through which we experience the writer tending seemingly ungraspable subjects. In "A Brief History of Bronze in Iraq," "Tin and Copper collide in fire, birthing bronze on land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers" (55). In a section set in Rwanda, to which Ulmer has traveled, "Fog weaves through banana tree leaves as men push bicycles loaded with yellow jerry cans uphill" (42). Or, in a return to her childhood home in Vermont: "I looked toward the apple tree I'd successfully protested my father cutting, the one under which I'd grown up counting deer, the one I'd climbed, the one the picture window looked out on, the one that made the house a house with its treeness" (19).

An appreciative thematics courses through this short book—of alienation and helplessness, suicide and solidarity, of making sense out of senseless human acts, of the difference between keeping watch, witnessing, and looking. Pursuing the possibility of a "reciprocal way of seeing" (13), Ulmer crafts imagined meetings of unlikely people and places (see Brown's Nathaniel Hawthorne and Brian Wilson again); she creates astonishing crossroads of unexpected themes-in-common,

but she also literally travels to and meets the people and places she writes of. Barring that, she composes letters.

What kind of work can a letter do in "The age of Virtual Reproduction"? Ulmer writes to a prisoner at Guantánamo Bay named Jumah, who has attempted suicide twelve times and is currently on a hunger strike. The letters come back to her, "some ripped open, others unread, all of the envelopes stamped *refused*" (24). There was a time when I had considered all writing as a form of unsent letter—those missives we all have stowed but never posted, usually expressions of love or anger—but Ulmer makes writing out of letters sent but not received, or letters bounced back. One imagines the amazing "Atlas of Restraint" as the astonishing recreation of any number of returned attempts at reaching and meeting.

The trajectory that Ulmer conceives in this piece begins as an address to an autistic eleven-year-old named Zach, who fell in love with a pot-bellied pig named Sid in Dakato City, Iowa. The pig is taken away from the boy because his keeping it violates a livestock ordinance, and both the boy and pig grow sick and depressed as a result. Ulmer travels from Zach and the pig to Arthur Koestler and solitary confinement; to her own anorexia (that serves as a thread in the weave of the piece rather than as a confessional origin); to questions of self-captivation, holding oneself hostage, or needing to be loved; to Temple Grandin's squeeze chair; to "the cruelty of the state" in the restraint chair that Jumah is held in; to Ulmer's meeting and interviewing the man who designed it, Tom Hogan, who lives in a town near where she lives in Iowa. I won't give any more of this meaning-making, non-narrative narrative away, but only say it is one of the most timely and memorable pieces of poetic, philosophic, and political commentary that I've encountered in the name of contemporary nonfiction.

If experimentation is conceived from within the work of art, I do have to wonder about experimental auras that seem unnecessarily imposed on this book. Does the absence of a reproduction of the August Sander photo with which the book opens have something to do with the book's quoting Walter Benjamin's famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"? I just can't tell. What compelled the writer or her editors to occasionally reduce the book's font to minuscule? The tactic is annoying at best, makes the sentences hard to get at even with my strongest pair of bifocals, and has nothing to do with the art of Walser's micrographs. Does this mean we have come full circle? Well, not exactly.

Recently I was trying to read a nonfiction bestseller that has enjoyed a great deal of hype . . . until I realized I wasn't really *reading* because the ostensible book didn't ask me to read. It required me to skim, to gloss, to skate, and to eat bits of jagged cardboard. But reading is a state (of transport), an act, and an exquisite demand. Great books are those that ask me to read them, and that teach me to read differently. Mary Ruefle, Rebecca Brown, and Spring Ulmer give me something to read, and they make me want to re-read. Ruefle makes me want to revisit Lydia Davis, and Brown makes me want to re-court Hawthorne, just as Ulmer makes me want to rediscover Benjamin—reading, again, and for the first time.