Inter-Review

Mary Cappello and Patrick Madden

Mary Cappello, *Life Breaks In: A Mood Almanack. With a Portfolio by Rosamond Purcell.*

CHICAGO: UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS, 2016. 408 PAGES, CLOTH, $29.00.

Patrick Madden, *Sublime Physick: Essays*

LINCOLN: UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA PRESS, 2016. 244 PAGES, CLOTH, $24.95.

Of the Essay's Insecurities

MC: In both of our books, we're playing with science, and contributing to it in turn, I think. I'm struck by the way in which a word will appear in a corner of a paragraph in your book that we know is drawn from the world of physics. And then there'll be a sentence that really is its own—why not—scientific formulation, but it teeters in some place between philosophy and science. One of my favorites: "If there is a contour to existence, it must be some sort of massive, oblong shape in perpetual motion. Ex-circles and in-circles in perfect rotation forever, where we stumble in the same 26 letters, and their most innumerable, but still numerable, combinations." We have a mutual mistrust of charts and other crude measurement devices that try to find concrete solutions to the mystery of existence, at the same time that we are both, I think, dancing with scientific discourse, or with scientific principles.

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PM: That brings up a question my students often have: if as essayists we fundamentally distrust reductive thinking or enumerated solutions, then what are we doing? A scientist is attempting to create knowledge of the way the world works—definable, denotative knowledge—in order not just to advance understanding but to increase possibilities, with inventions that derive from new understandings of physical laws, that allow us, for instance, this magic of seeing each other across hundreds of miles and speaking, hearing, seeing each other simultaneously, through processes we don't really understand, you and I. We couldn't build this.

MC: Well, that last bit sounds a lot like what happens when we read and when we write, but go on.

PM: There's certainly a value to that kind of science, right? But our project is a kind of pause, examination, and reconsideration, to paraphrase the carvings in Montaigne's rafters. The essay as a mode is subversive of that notion, right? That we can know to the nth degree of accuracy the workings of the world? Maybe we're taking a different approach to it.

Your book approaches mood, which isn't the type of subject that you see in a physics/biology/chemistry class. You do point to some works that attempt to regulate mood, or chart mood disorders, in normalizing ways. But your book challenges that project early on and creates a richer, more appealing and pleasant exploration.

So, while I'm on your side, I'm asking still, what good is that? What is that for?

MC: There are a lot of ways to respond to this. First of all, to go back to your students' question, where they want to put science alongside literary art and ask questions about what good is it, or what is it that we're doing that is equally meaningful.

PM: Right. What's the use value or the utility of writing an essay?

MC: I think that's precisely the wrong question. The problem is thinking in terms of our lives, and that which we make, as simply or strictly instrumental. I don't turn to art for that, for "a solution."

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We turn to art for a different way of asking a question in the first place. Maybe we could come up with two lists that would put the language of science alongside the language of the art of the essay. For example, if science is interested in *accuracy*, the art of the essay might be interested in *clarity*. And we could have an entire discussion about the nature of clarity, how it's different from transparency, and how it's hard won.

Secondly, science is interested in *reproducibility*, and therefore it requires a blueprint. As we know, one of the difficulties for people who are coming to writing, or even coming to classes in literature, is that—though we do offer ways, and we are gentle guides who sometimes walk behind our students rather than in front of them—we can rarely offer blueprints. You can't say, "Do this, and it will produce this." Whereas science depends upon the blueprint. The project of science is to constantly reproduce the same result. We're not interested in that. We're interested in *variability* of premises and results. I think science has a love/hate relationship to that endless variability.

Third, science is interested in problems. We are too. But maybe we're trying to produce new questions about the problems rather than cutting to the chase of the answer. And fourth, science relies on tests and testing. You talk about the essay's Montaignean roots in putting something on trial, not in the sense of a courtroom, but trying it out, trying it on. What happens if you put this thing in different contexts?

But, look, now I've fallen into the trap of opposing science and art—which generates that utility question in the first place—when really, I think that science and art more often productively overlap: it's our assumptions about both that need revising.

Of Experience

PM: As long ago as 2007 you said on your website that you were writing about mood, and I thought, *That's a book I want to read*. Maybe because I had the perspective of your then-newest book, *Awkward*, I expected a book that does what you do in that book, which is trouble the concept of mood, try to create moods, to *be* a mood, in a sense. So when you asked about playing with science and contributing to science, it feels to me that your book is valuable—if I can say *valuable* instead of *useful*—particularly because it shakes us away from

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the kind of relationship to mood that wants to fix mood, or normalize mood, or think of moods as clearly delineated: happy, sad, excited, anxious. Your book denies these one-word adjectives, or subverts them; it tries to feel mood as something pervasive and inescapable. It's a system from which we cannot gain a distance to analyze it. And in terms of scientific method, the ideal that scientists aim to achieve is separation from the system in order to observe the system without affecting the system. Which you recognize as impossible, and probably not even desirable.

MC: Thank you. That's a fabulous commentary. Where can I jump in? You're saying so many different things! First of all, sometimes if I were to say that I was writing a book about mood, the assumption, at least among Americans, would be, "You must be writing a book about depression." And then you turn to depression, and you realize depression is such a shrunken language for states of mind. I go back to the dictionary to find that, wow, in the sixteenth, seventeenth, or eighteenth centuries, there were so many different ways to describe what we now might call depression: "tristesse," "jaw-fall," "mubble-fubbles," "mulligrubs." They have onomatopoeic and playful and social overtones. If I say "depression," it's like something used to seal the lid on the tomb of human consciousness, right?

PM: Right.

MC: Why have we insisted on straight-jacketing mood?

So I took the approach of trying to write with mood in mind. I wasn't interested in defining it. If I could define it, I wouldn't need to write. I was fundamentally interested in it as something foundational but ungraspable. My approach was to wait, with mood alongside me, to see what it would give rise to, where it would take me, where I would find it lurking. That's where I had a lot of fun turning to clouds and weather.

If there does seem to be an affinity between clouds and moods, perhaps I could do something I call "cloud writing." Ask your students to put that in their pipes and smoke it. Their parents will say, "What are you doing?" "I'm doing some cloud writing." "Yeah. Okay . . ."

PM: It sounds sort of pleasant. Some of my students have children, so if they

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told their children they were doing cloud writing, I think the children would be quite pleased. But if they told their parents, their parents would worry that they're wasting their lives. Maybe they already worry about this.

MC: Let's come back to children, because I think that childhood and children are at the center of both our books in a kind of uncanny way. I think these books are very different from one another, but childhood and children, child-mind, I think, is central to both.

Of Children and Time

MC: I want to come back to something that came up at the Ocean State Summer Writing Conference (OSSWC), where we read together our essays, both of which dealt with the reality of missing children. Why do I always forget the title of that amazing essay?

PM: Thank you. It's "Entering and Breaking."

MC: "Entering and Breaking." And my essay was "Merit Badge." I wanted to come back to that point when one of your sons appears, and you pose this question to the figure on the horizon: "Who is that kid?" I remembered the question as "Who is that?" And I was thinking of this as a kind of magnet at the center of the essay, around which all the other filings accrue or disperse. I have a lot to say about that question, and what it means for that question to be lodged at the center of the essay, and the sort of work it does. Time is very central as a theme to this book, and mortality. I happened upon one of my favorite paragraphs on that subject—it's just so beautiful—in "Miser's Farthings," which is an essay where you show your striking abilities to work among and between registers of philosophy and physics as well as the perfectly mundane, daily aspects of our lives. It's on page 86:

> They say that our first years imprint us indelibly, shape our selves in unalterable ways. . . . But those first few years of childhood experience produce no definable memories, only general impressions that we cannot trace. So maybe one reason I'm so obsessed with moments is that I'm surrounded by

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> little people who can barely conceive of time's passage, who cannot form the merest thought of their own mortality, who have no access to notions of events, because they do not yet form memories. I worry, too, that they are losing me, minute by minute, yet they see me as a static creature, fundamentally extant in their lives, pre-existing them, and always to be.

It's such a brilliant and beautiful formulation of that central conundrum of being in time, and being a parent in time. It's just so rich, and I experience it as one of the book's many epicenters.

Of Serendipity and Takeaway

PM: I was looking up a passage in your book, trying to find something about your method and your process of writing, and I'd taken some notes, but I actually first turned to the wrong page, and yet I still found a passage that fits. So I have both now. I'm thinking about the way the book accrues meaning, an expansive meaning, not a reductive meaning. The passage I was looking for is on page 138. You're talking about what is a study, the act, as a noun, or as a verb. But you take a step back and say, "If I lend enough devotion to my task, not exactly obediently or even routinely, but in the manner of a naive follower, something will emerge that I could never have anticipated finding."

MC: Thank you. You're great, Patrick. That's it. All that stuff I was trying to say, that's it.

PM: That's the method. Curiously, but not surprisingly, the "wrong" page I turned to also has a passage that demonstrates this. It's cast in the first person plural, on page 119: "If we detach ourselves from, listen to, and pursue our subject in equal measure"—so it's this oxymoronic detachment-pursuit—"maybe a truth we could not have imagined will come to light."

MC: Yeah.

PM: And then you have your example: you were thinking about mood rings and you recalled your Aunt Frances coughing blood, and you now believe this

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may have been a result of taking lithium. So you come to a new understanding or perception of something that was unclear to you, not by aiming head-on toward it but by thinking peripherally.

MC: Right.

PM: So that's one of the fascinating and, again, unsurprising aspects of your book, and maybe essays more broadly, too: that we gain a kind of understanding, or we find subjects that we weren't looking for directly. There's a serendipity to the process.

MC: Totally. Which comes back to utility—you know there's this big emphasis today, and I really dislike this phrase—on "the takeaway." "What was the takeaway?" This casts reading and writing in terms of production and consumption. I'm supposed to be giving you something that you can then walk off with. You pay your dollar; you're supposed to get something in return. But these processes are so much more multidimensional and mercurial and differently enriching, and they do not have to do with a takeaway. They have to do with making available an experience. An experience of thought. And, as you say, we know that the beauty of this kind of work is that if I'm not looking for the answer, and I'm not looking in the places where I'm told to look, but if I'm willing instead to let the language lead or begin in a place that feels counterintuitive, alter my vantage point . . . if we're willing to do all of those things, something will emerge that was unanticipated, and that in fact might even be the truth. I can become aware of, suddenly aware of, a new truth.

PM: Right.

MC: That's what I meant when I said it seemed like what I had to do was to be willing to situate myself somehow differently so that mood would occasionally make itself available or apparent. And sometimes that was not possible unless I actually tried to write not *about* it, but with mood in mind.

I've used this analogy to John Constable, who says he was trying to do something "*like* clouds." Not depict clouds, but do something like clouds, and I thought that that was also what I was trying to do.

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PM: Which creates a different kind of book. You said that you're trying to make available an experience of thought. Which is, I think, a different project from a lot of what falls under the umbrella of creative nonfiction, which is attempting to make available a lived experience. It's a re-creation of an event in the writer's life. And yet, your book, my book, while they both do contain events translated into writing, I don't think that our project is to "recreate a cloud" or "represent a cloud." It is to . . . what was it that John Constable said?

MC: He was "skying." When he went out to look at clouds, he actually created this verb. He was sky-ing. He said he was trying to do something "like clouds."

PM: Right, so that the painting itself is like clouds. In the case of your writing, it seems very clear to me that I'm not just reading about, say, your experiences with your nephew, right? I'm not reading *about* the time you went to the mood chamber. The purpose isn't that. And I'd say in my book, even in an essay that is largely narrative, like the one you referenced, "Entering and Breaking," where there *is* a story—my sons were missing for two hours, and we found them again—I don't want to write simply the narrative of suspense and drama. I didn't want to even create for the reader an experience parallel to my own. I didn't want you to worry about whether the sons would ever be found again. Instead, I broke in fairly early and told you the ending. I wanted to explore the thoughts that I've had in the aftermath of the experience. So I am trying to recreate, or to create, "make available" as you said, thinking, which has been my own, has been translated into language, and is available for a reader whose experience will not be my own, but will be something effected by my writing.

Of Experience (2)

MC: I think you're bringing us back to this question of the status of experience, right? And the way it gets held up as the basis of our writing. And this notion that we have had to experience something that we are then translating into language. And you're saying that really isn't what we're doing at all.

PM: No.

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MC: Sometimes, the memory of experience is the occasion for the writing, but I think what we're both interested in is the kind of thinking that some memory of an experience makes possible.

PM: Right.

MC: If I think with this experience, what kind of truths can I arrive at (multiple, contradictory, beautiful)? I was thinking back to science again, and what you're doing in your book. You are interested in experimentation: you playfully literalize the idea of the essay as experiment on the self (à la Montaigne) by performing *actual* experiments on yourself that you then write about. But the essays are also thought experiments. So there's a degree to which re-cognition falls out of the picture. In other words, when I'm in the midst of your essays—and I hope the same goes for what you're describing in reading my book—we're brushing up against the uncanny, and these aspects of so-called "experience" that are not visible when we are inside of experience. If I stay inside the moves and tempos and layers and playfulnesses of a Patrick Madden essay, then for a spell, something becomes available, thanks to what you've done.

PM: Thank you. I often return to the idea that while in some ways lived experience is richer than a written transcription of experience, in other, important ways, literature creates an experience that cannot be had without language, writing, reading. An essay can *beat* life, can be more rewarding and fulfilling than what we've seen, heard, smelled, tasted, touched "in real life."

MC: I always come back to this idea that experience—as it's pitched in common parlance—isn't all it's cracked up to be. Because if you really start to investigate experience, you find that most of the time, we don't even know that we're experiencing. "Are we having fun yet?" "Are we really experiencing this?" "How do I know?" So I think it's an illusion that we give ourselves to feel stable in the world, to think that there's this thing called "experience" that predates writing. One of the things I think that happens in the midst of your essaying, and the kind of work I'm trying to do, is that the experience is almost an aftereffect of the writing. It doesn't come before it as something you're trying to have a descriptive relationship to.

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PM: Right.

MC: We are creating something *of* an experience. It *is* an experience; the writing itself *is* an event. But then, there's this stuff of our lives that percolates through, or rises to the surface, or begs to be looked at as we create these essay events. It's not a takeaway. It's not so solid as that, it's an effect.

PM: Yeah.

MC: And the other thing is, this idea of aftereffects. There's a point in the mood book where I play with this idea that maybe musicians create a beautiful song, but then there's that weird and playful moment after the song where there might be just a few notes that a guitarist plays absentmindedly, and that became available because of the mood created by the piece that she was playing. That's where the real music is.

Of Audacity

MC: You and I both agreed to be audacious in producing long-form pieces in our books that might seem indulgent. They are the book within the book. In your book, it's the essay on whether it's possible for anything to be original. The title of the essay—

PM: "Independent Redundancy."

MC: "Independent Redundancy." And in my book, it's "Synesthesia for Orphaned Boys," which seems to conclude at one point but then keeps going as I move on to another subject—picture books. For me, audacity is a requirement of what we do, but also asking people to *stay* in an era that's about quick exits and fragmented attention. That's what the Internet is about, it seems. And I don't need for people to catch every word. It's about creating a place of hover and drift. It's saying, "Come into this wave with me, and I don't care how you want to ride it. But it's going to be quite a long lull."

PM: I feel the same way.

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MC: You might be the best person to investigate this form, because you do so much fine thinking about temporality. You're a physicist essayist. So, there's not an easy answer here. It's not about length. Are we talking about scale? Are we talking about balance? Or how could you bring the way that you think about time to this desire, perhaps now, to work in shorter forms? For me, it's about what I've been avoiding, which I think is that I was trained as a poet, and I came to the essay through wanting to create a place where a scholarly ethos could meet a poetic sensibility. I find myself thinking with this book that I want poets to read it—that's who I want my audience to be, and I think I want to give myself over more fully to the poet who I've always been.

PM: For me, too, writing long pieces is about choosing an audience. Because the person who reads that long essay is an ally of sorts. At the very least, they've trusted you to make it worth their while. You cannot assume that your book is obligatory to anybody.

Of Literary Creation

PM: Earlier you were talking about wanting your book to both *create* and *be* the aftereffect, which relies on the work for context and meaning and pleasure. And also about how a work of literature is a creation of its own; it's not simply representing the source material that it derives from. In my transitionary phase, when I started to change the way I thought about apprehending the world, I arranged an interview with Eduardo Galeano in Uruguay. We met in an old Montevideo café, and I came, very nervous, with my list of 63 questions. But he was so generous, and the conversation so natural, that I ended up using only two of the questions, one of which was the rather trite, and certainly overused, question about "What can a nonfiction writer invent?" The fact and fiction debate.

To his credit, he twisted the question, because he was wise and wary, and he gave me a new way of thinking about it, which was this:

> We begin with the moment an act happens in reality, outside an author's head, and then the author reproduces inside himself what happened outside himself. Then this idea, this reproduction of the act inside the author's head,

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> also becomes part of reality. The original act, which comes from reality, is transfigured in the process of creation.

I think it's a fairly simple idea, though it's something I hadn't perceived before. But that day, I started to think of the act of writing as its own creation. There's not just a simple correspondence between the text and the thing the text refers to or derives from. The text is itself a creation, and part of reality. I've had colleagues goad me that everything is fiction, and, sure, that's an interesting way of thinking, but Galeano's argument was that everything is *non*fiction. Everything is reality.

MC: I love that. The creation is a parcel of the real.

PM: And I was thinking about this with your book, too. When you think about View-Masters and photographs on page 163, you're talking about seeing these miniatures from fairy tales or Disney and so forth, and you say,

> Of course these things I behold are photographs, and the photographer was responsible for the fabrication of their shadows, their mysteriously suspended parts, their genies and ghosts amid the solid tables. But it's not the photographer I think of or want to know. I think, instead, of their maker. Who was the crafter of the wave that holds the little mermaid? Where did she find her stuff?

This is how you get into Florence Thomas, who created so many of the miniature scenes for View-Master slides. I've seen View-Master slides before, but my mind has never gone where yours goes. You may remember years ago I shared with you that wonderful experience where my son Marcos was looking through a View-Master at a scene of Sunset Point in Bryce Canyon, Utah.

MC: Yeah.

PM: We don't know how the View-Master got into the car, or how that particular slide disc got into it, or why he decided to take the View-Master on the short hike up to the canyon, but as we milled about admiring the panorama, he was looking through the View-Master, and he said, "Look, I take a picture!" And

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we looked, and he was looking at a slide of the exact scene he was looking at in reality. He was, I don't know, three or four years old at the time. There was no contrived intent. It was pure, glorious happenstance.

MC: Wow.

PM: When I read your book, I think about the writer. Of course, I know you personally, but that's a different type of relationship than what I mean. Reading your book I feel the presence of and a curiosity for, and maybe consubstantiation with, the maker.

MC: I feel the same. That's beautiful. I feel the same with reading you. It's the maker, and the made, and the presence of that maker in that voice of yours, you know? And it's a gentle soul, I feel.

PM: Which is the hope.

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