Another with a friend who didn’t survive. In its way, her prose is as finicky as poetry; it lives and dies by the way it’s arranged on the page. (Manguso’s poetry, though equally cerebral, is less astringent.)

Ongoingness seems like the product of absolute reduction. Specifics have been seared away: where the narrator went to college and where she now teaches, her favorite band and the painting she fell in love with, the elderly writer she corresponded with before his death, and the names of her friends, husband, and son—all are a curious blank. She leaves plenty of white space, which toward the end of the book is interrupted by bursts of color, as the vibrancy of the present demands her attention, or summons an infant memory. A blue stuffed animal makes an appearance, as does the brightness of her boy’s hair, or the rainbows of her husband’s youth. Stripped of excess, the sentences are so stark as to seem opaque.

The one point when Manguso seems to falter is after Ongoingness ends. In an afterword, she explains her choice not to include the original diary, and details her process of rereading the 23 files, selecting excerpts, and then dispensing with this strategy altogether. This is the first time that she goes out of her way to explain herself, her coda, like those prefaces by fellow authors, betrays the apparent confidence of the rest of the book. The sentences grow longer and more prosaic. It’s perhaps best to consider these final pages akin to a director’s commentary: some may find this insight illuminating; others may find that this postscript dilutes the work itself.

In his 1972 book Ways of Seeing, the art critic John Berger draws a distinction between naked and nude female subjects, a metric since applied to writerly self-portraiture. Readers expect memoirs to orient themselves around a set of polar axes: growing pains versus progress gained, exposure versus disguise, confession versus composure. Manguso’s work defies these dichotomies; its closest relative among schools of painting might be Abstract Expressionism. She weaponizes solipsism to dive into the bedrock of human experience: memory faltering in the face of mortality; the humility commanded by time; the impossibility of taking the full measure of one’s life. The question that pervades all of Manguso’s work, and forms the heart and vascular system of Ongoingness, is: Why write? That question’s obverse reveals itself as: How to live?

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