

REVIEWS

The Grand Permission: New Writings on Poetics and Motherhood.

Patricia Dienstfrey, Brenda Hillman, editors.

Wesleyan University Press, 2003.

308 pages, \$24.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Rachel Kubie

The title itself a great relief, like a tightly pent-up sigh—a collection of essays about the wrestling embrace between making art and the all-consuming daily-ness of mothering. And it is a new work, full of exhaustion, surprise, interruption, intellect, exasperation, and experiment. The pieces included are essays proper; collage and waste book; pillow book; notes; and journal entries, all crafted by artists working in the midst of the highest stakes and most basic chores. It is an exciting layering of parallel stories, musings, and investigations. The voices are frank, challenging, and intimate.

Poets and editors, Patricia Dienstfrey and Brenda Hillman ask whether and how motherhood might transform an artist, her practice, her poetry itself. The cacophony of response that springs up here makes fascinating reading: thirty-two meditations on poetics and motherhood that seem to bear little in common but candor and intelligence, although, as Erica Hunt writes in “The World Is Not Precisely Round,” “There is something sweetly seductive about the myth of infinite capacity; in every woman there is an ancient Devi—multi-armed, tirelessly creative.” Here may be a common thread for many of the essays—late nights and early mornings, endless interruptions, the solitary pressure to create, and the companionship of someone entirely new to the world, entirely vulnerable to it, held within the artist’s protection, looking back into the artist’s gaze.

Although this is not a work of instruction, not a how-to for the mother artist, it is a crowd of especially literate, articulate women, thinking and speaking where there is traditionally a barrier of narrative silence between the

created poem and life lived behind it. Laura Moriarty notes in “The Writing Being” that our traditional perception of the author is one who “must be able to privilege writing and thinking over other concerns” and therefore “the writing being considered here routinely outrages the perceived limits of the writer’s identity.” Many of these poets seek a kind of narrative, a kind of line that might allow interruption, fragmentation. Kathleen Fraser says, in (the beautifully titled) “To Book as in To Foal. To Son,” “My thoughts were blips and scrolls and departures. Unexpectedness, chaos, pressures and breaks. Everything seemed to tilt, to barely maintain itself. In spite of all effort. I thought, why not write that way?” Erica Hunt says of the process of each, motherhood and poetry, that “each act of writing or mothering stuns by the immensity of its hidden archaeology of failure, riddled origins, hidden clauses, minute pleasures achieved through tactical approximations.”

The traditional angle of the artist is shifted. Rather than the solitary figure, able to reflect the world with a fresh clarity by not being entirely invested in it, here, the poet’s solitude is contingent. The artists are not only invested in the social world, but also generative of it and guardians of it. It is on the other side of a door pulled barely closed.

Evan Boland writing gorgeously in “The Other Sylvia Plath,” crafts a picture of the poet in an English countryside, at the early edge of a notoriously bitter winter, nursing her son by candlelight in a voluminous, chill, sheeted house, composing the most powerful poems of her life, and revising by the acoustics of those large bare rooms. Boland argues that Plath, here, over the course of a few days at the end of October, refashions the whole tradition of the nature poem—the figure of the poet, who has traditionally been awed and instructed by nature (“a rough dumb country stuff”), becomes instead the foreground of the pastoral, not the alienated intrusion—determined, “to make nature dream with her.”

A series of small, titled musings by Susan Griffin in

“And the Motherhood of Poetics,” almost too delicious to read at one sitting, explore physical aspects of pregnancy and birth paired with literary musings. A reflection by Alicia Ostricker that begins exhausted, reluctant to engage, ends plentifully as Molly Bloom claiming language as maternal. Camille Roy, with a dramatist’s sense of quick pacing, examines gender roles in a family with two mothers and two fathers. Claudia Keelan reads the visions of Weil, Keats, and King transformed by motherhood.

Carla Harryman works a piece difficult to pin to any genre (as many of them are) by aligning personal essay and an experimental “play” side by side, weaving literary and personal events. Alice Notley weaves a familial knot of poetics, capturing the speech of her children and finding herself reflected in her sons’ adult work as poets themselves. Carol Muske-Dukes wonderfully examines her poetic parentage by the canon of classical poetry and her mother’s verbal wildness—reciting, instructing, cursing, laughing, in one long breathless line, “a fiery shipwreck of words”—and the heart murmur she posits may have crafted her earliest sense and appreciations of strange rhythms. C. D. Wright writes a rollicking report on sleep deprivation, devotion, and such “marvelous questions” as “Are there any blue hairs on my back” and “How many days are there in a life?” Fanny Howe weaves children’s tale, folklore, and myth, into a mother’s sense of creating an artificial work, “intensified daily by the cries of the natural.”

The pieces included are so varied, so many of them difficult to pin to any genre, so full of poetry, that it is impossible to do the volume justice by touching on a few. The collection is like the fierce talk of adults in a front room while children run in and out, playful and demanding, changing the course and rhythms of that conversation, frustrating it, lightening it, enlivening it, deepening it.



Facts in the Case of E. A. P. (or) Low Road to El Dorado.
Jim Cory.
Mooncalf Press, 2003.
12 pages, \$3.17 (paperback).

Reviewed by David Need

Presenting his short study of Poe as a collection of fragmentary poems and supposedly archival material, Cory produces a Rashomon-like biographical portrait of the nineteenth-century American writer. Given Poe’s archetypal and occult position in American letters, the ploy of the possibly fictive archive produces the useful biograph-

ical effect of leaving Poe hidden behind the surfaces and gestures in which his character is realized.

But there is more here than biography. Cory’s work appears to reference the 1979 fictional biography of Poe entitled *The Facts in the Case of E. A. Poe* by the Scottish historian and social critic Andrew Sinclair. Sinclair’s piece similarly pretends to be a case study—Sinclair presents himself as the editor of the manuscripts of a fictive biographer named Ernest Albert Pons who believes himself to be Poe—and thus one wonders, reading Cory’s piece, if one has not stumbled over the traces of a long-running literary joke.

If so, it is a complicated joke, since a joke about identity in the American context questions the idealization of the heroic manly writer—Whitman, London, Hemingway—as the epitome of the American artist. The bitter, sweet, blasted Poe that Cory sketches is at least as familiar—at least to artists and writers—and reminds us that competition and envy are the reverse face of the coin of American individualism. That said, Cory permits Whitman—or at least his avatar—the final word, where he has the poet refer to Poe as “a little jaded.” This undermines the nuanced balance Cory establishes elsewhere in his economical evocation of the pros and cons of his subject.



Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers.
Mary Roach.
W. W. Norton & Company, 2003.
303 pages, \$23.95 (hardback).

Reviewed by Chad Driscoll

The human corpse leaves to the living a haunted estate. At first we see only the view it offers of ourselves, inert and ruined. Look beyond this, however, and you find our uniquely human prospects for teaching and learning from each other don’t end where we end. What the remains of the living still have to offer the living is the subject under investigation in Mary Roach’s *Stiff: The Curious Lives of Human Cadavers*.

Roach has written for publications as clashy as *Vogue*, *Reader’s Digest*, and *Discover*. She’s covered the map, stylistically, and in this book she lets her nomadic voice speak in all its chattering tongues. The early chapters showcase her powers of historical research and her magpie-eye for shiny bits of trivia. Examples: Herophilus, the “Father of Anatomy,” performed vivisections (live dissections) on as many as 600 poor souls. The “Father of Embalming,” Thomas Holmes, insisted on the cremation