

“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