



BROWSE



Embalming Mom: Essays in Life (review)

Philip F. Deaver

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REVIEW

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Reviews Full-Length Reviews Embalming Mom: Essays in Life by Janet Burroway University of Iowa Press, 2002 150 pages, cloth, \$24.95 Ghost of May Sarton, please stand. Bones of Virginia Woolf, take notice. In the more peripatetic life of the new millennium, here is Janet Burroway in memoir. These revised and rounded, then collected, (apparent) journal entries reveal a stormier Burroway than I have seen before (though I might have heard the thunder in the distance). And a more fierce one, though we all know one must be fierce to sustain a career as a writer these days. But still. The trajectory of frankness and self-revelation in many of these pieces confesses unmistakably to have its source in her journals or wherever she keeps her most private of musings and most personal of openings up. It's the sound of a grown writer whispering to herself (I imagine early in the morning, at her writing table—re-sorting the ever-more-immense, delicious, perplexing, immovable past, digging up the dead and reanimating them, peering around the corners that didn't get peered around the first time, all the way back)... All the way back to Sylvia Plath, Burroway's (sort of) friend in the '50s—in "I Didn't Know Sylvia Plath," we learn that Sylvia had done a special as guest editor at

Mademoiselle, and Burroway then held the same position a short time later. It was the mid-'50s and it seems that during that period the young, promising writers were being allowed a peek into the big time in this way, and a secondary effect of the program was that the young up-and-comers got to know each other by following each other's tracks in the suite of offices of Mademoiselle, and afterwards, on down through their careers if their future was long, or if the future wasn't, into the cave of depression and self-destruction as in the case of Sylvia Plath. This essay is as much about the life and doubt of a young, determined writer (Janet Burroway herself) as it is about the tip of the Ted Hughes/Sylvia Plath iceberg that Burroway witnessed from a distance of one degree of separation. She was 19 or 20 years old at the beginning of that story and it was the beginnings of the Beat movement and so obviously also just before the beginnings of the women's movement. She went to England and perchance became part of one of the most exciting literary classes at Oxford, her life following a trajectory near Plath's. When Sylvia Plath died, there was much to learn for the young female writer of that time. Using her death to shout, Sylvia Plath found a way for her work not to be overlooked. It was about putting a stake in the ground, putting her money where her mouth was, and of course also making a sick escape. Janet Burroway noted that, found a different way to make a life as a writer. At the last of this essay, she imagines Plath being invited to read at the Associated Writing Programs conference, along with her peers Grace Paley and Maxine Kumin. She imagines having a chance to talk with Sylvia, and finding out how things are going, how her life would have gone on if only it had. Imagine her if you will, grayed, still lean but looser bodied, rising to the podium . . . freed by her PC of all those arduous retypings, her London flat now central-heated, likewise her suburban pool, the children of her first failed marriage grown and accounted for, she peaceably partnered or peacefully alone like the rest of us at sixty-plus; saying: it was bloody, but I'm glad they got to me in time. *Embalming Mom* is named for the other of the two long pieces in the book, this one a dialogue between the author and the shade of her mother (shadily ironing clothes while they move through their imagined discussion) in which all things get sorted after Burroway summons her and offers, "I want to put you in a story." In this pose, self-talk (with the authority of Mother) takes on new ballast...

Book

Reviews

Full-Length Reviews

Embalming Myself: Essays in Life

by Janet Burroway

University of Iowa Press, 2002

150 pages, cloth, \$24.95

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All the way back to Sylvia Plath. Burroway's (sort of) friend in the '50s in "I Didn't Know Sylvia Plath," we learn that Sylvia had done a spell as guest editor at *Madrainiselle*, and Burroway then held the same position a short time later. It was the mid '50s and it seems that during that period the young, promising writers were being allowed to peek into the log line in this way, and a secondary effect of the program was that the young up and comers got to know each other by following each other's tracks in the suite of offices of *Madrainiselle*, and afterwards, on down through their careers if their future was long, or if the future wasn't, into the cave of depression and self-





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