

*Defending Andy* is a worthy study into the human psyche. All the reader can do is wish Azevedo well in her search for peace and self-acceptance, and continued success in her attempts to help others in similar situations.

## **Embalming Mom: Essays in Life**

Janet Burroway  
Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002

### **Reviewed by Jane Satterfield**

*Embalming Mom: Essays in Life*, a recent volume in the Iowa Series in Literary Nonfiction, tracks one woman's journey through the personal, aesthetic, and historical upheavals of the mid- to late twentieth century life. Beginning with the witty, insightful self-portrait in "I Didn't Know Sylvia Plath," (like others of her generation, the writer observed the youthful Plath's ascendance at a careful distance, ultimately following in her footsteps to a *Mademoiselle* internship, a Cambridge Fulbright, and beyond), Burroway's experience forms a vivid backdrop to her analysis of female passage through pre- to post-feminist eras.

As a teenager, Burroway reports, she possessed two conflicting "visions" of herself: artist and self-effacing mother. What she did not understand, however, "was that the choice might never be made, that my life could unroll, or lurch, or cascade, with the tension between them constant." While each of the sixteen essays included in this collection bears the stamp of this knowledge, each remains stylistically distinct. The title essay, for example, is an imaginary dialogue between the writer and her mother. "Changes," a collage essay, explores the effects of ageing on the female mind and body. Whether reflecting on the ambiguities of raising a "Soldier Son"; describing the beauty of the American landscape; negotiating ideology with daily life; meditating on her collection of photographs or tenancy of an English garden, Burroway avoids sensation and stereotype while celebrating the rewards and challenges of a life lived as writer, lover, wife, mother, and stepmother.

Essayist Philip Lopate once observed that the essay's "capacity for processing doubt is part of what makes it so stimulating and tonic." A narrator who resists wearing learning on her sleeve and is open to self-contradiction, Burroway's insights are seamlessly interwoven with "trash talk that can take the mickey out of its own best brag" ("Trash Talk"), as when her "own presumptions bang me on the forehead crude as a stepped on rake" – a literal reminder that "gaining perspective is a process never finished" ("Of the Beholder"). Burroway's essays are stimulating and tonic indeed, making *Embalming Mom* a valuable contribution to the essay tradition.