

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### THE OLD GODS STILL LIVE: FIVE NEW BOOKS

by Matthew Ladd

Reginald Shepherd, *Red Clay Weather*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 88 pp., \$14.95.

Wayne Miller, *The City, Our City*. Milkweed Editions, 105 pp., \$16.

Jessica Fisher, *Inmost*. Nightboat Books, 80 pp., \$15.95.

Ira Sadoff, *True Faith*. BOA Editions, 86 pp., \$16.

Paisley Rekdal, *Animal Eye*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 86 pp., \$15.95.

Those who are frustrated by the perceived “smallness” of contemporary American poetry are often fond of reciting the axiom that poets today simply gaze out their kitchen windows and write what they see. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perhaps this perception has something to do with the inevitable popularity of poems that are easily digested in a single sitting. Or maybe it’s simply a new decade’s reaction to what people wrote in the last one. Whatever the reason, the five poets covered here are not writing small poems. They are writing—dare we say it—ambitious ones, poems that visibly grapple with difficult subjects, and that often do so with language that cuts roughly to the bone. No doubt there will always be a few kitchen-window poets to give the critics something to grumble about. The selection of work that follows, however, is ample evidence that theirs is not the only contemporary mode.

#### I

The final book of poetry by Reginald Shepherd, who died in 2008 after a struggle with cancer, opens with an essay by his partner Robert Philen, explaining where Shepherd’s work ends and Philen’s begins. Shepherd finished the book, except for its final poem, which he did not

have time to revise. He died before he could organize the collection. That task falls to Philen, who, aside from loosely grouping the poems by theme and splitting the book into two parts, mostly stifles the curatorial impulse and lets the poems speak for themselves. They do so in a measured and purposeful voice, taking as their subjects—perhaps unsurprisingly—death and the human body.

A singular exception is the final, unrevised poem, “God-With-Us,” an impressionistic cascade of celestial images (“star of milk, star of a / nursing child’s mouth, my / child, my lord”) that end with the deftly chosen metaphor “How I want to believe. / (a pearl, an irritant).” The rest of Shepherd’s poems are anchored firmly in the earth of the living and the dying. As his speaker observes in “Once Thought to Have Been Destroyed,” “nothing lasts of us // but teeth and mineralized bone,” an interesting observation for a book that seems anxious to immortalize as much of its author’s last few years as possible. The opening clutch of poems offers us visions of a physical body coming to terms with its deficiencies, as in “Days like Survival,” where the poet’s “predictable machinery / cranks up and body opens into morning, / damage done and not yet done,” and more troublingly in “To Be Free,” where:

... I wake up  
with music pouring from my skin, morning  
burning behind closed blinds. Dead  
light, dead warmth on dead skin

cells. . . .

These poems also find Shepherd at his most elemental, here calling water from the sky as if it were an ancient god. If this book had a concordance, “weather” would surely land near the top of the list. In “What Nature Doesn’t Show” he writes, “rain makes of me / a lake or pool or puddle.” “September Songs” finds the poet driving with a friend or partner through a rainstorm: “I pull rain through my fingers, / my dry hair and dry eyes; leaves’ / tapered drip points bow down to wet weather.”

Shepherd’s attachment to such imagery does not always make for unfailing lines. Those that succeed do so because Shepherd weaves the language of weather into the fabric of the poem itself. Take the first six lines of “Doppelganger Music”:

Must I wake again from dreams of March storms  
 to see you walking through the window  
 from the night that loves you, from the March  
 storm you bring in with you, that takes your shape

in hollow sheets, molds them with your vagabond  
 hands, cold and unstained by ragged rain?

The poet is working here with a modest stock of unremarkable words: storms, night, shape, hands, cold, rain. Yet they bind themselves together with assonance and off-rhyme, lending the sequence a delicacy and coherence that some of his weaker weather-centric poems struggle to attain.

Shepherd's title suggests a fixation with earth and water, but some of the best poems in *Red Clay Weather* are only concerned with the former. Though Part I closes with an out-of-place triptych of prose poems ("Flying," "Falling," "Some Dreams He Forgot") whose chatty, meandering paragraphs seem lifted straight from a private diary, in Part II Shepherd regains his footing with "Dead Boys Club," in which the Greek hero Achilles "refuses to outrun death, / his thighs white with dust / as if he were already ash / and burned bone." Thus begins an impressive series of poems whose chief subject matter, Greek hero-worship, is rendered in "porous marble" and "cracked // basilicas and toppled colonnades," and whose mythic figures—Achilles, Orpheus, Narcissus—are brought to life on the page so that we may see them die again. "A Little Iliad," for instance, presents Achilles in the glory of his myth, a demigod who "kills and is killed by turns, / greatest of the fabled dead / from the day of his oracled birth," but later dredges up the line that Achilles delivers when Odysseus calls him up from Hades in the *Odyssey*: "Better to be a slave of a slave / and full of breath / than king of all ghosts underground." Drawing on such a rich body of lyric and myth provides Shepherd with an expansive field on which to play out his dreams of death. When Part II moves from the ancient Mediterranean to the modern Middle East, in "Next Year in Gomorrah," the speaker's elegiac depiction of the Dead Sea, where he walks "beside the / lowest body of water on earth, collecting // cowrie shells and lizard skulls," seems more deeply rooted in human history than any single life could ever be.

When we reach the final pages of Part II, a startling cluster of poems that brim with rain and violently tinted gardens (“azalea’s pink / and blood-red riots,” “lush and poisoned landscapes”), the water flooding the earth takes on new meaning. Greek myth returns in “Narcissus Before the Rain,” but not for long; for the most part, the poems here look forward to a blurred, uncertain future. Such uncertainty is captured best in “Soon,” a quietly anxious struggle to come to terms with the unknown:

Here’s weather in a glass  
of rain, the sodden architecture

of unrequited silence, rooms  
through which I will have wandered

after wondering myself here, where I am  
to find myself again for the first time

at last. . .

Coming from a poet at the end of his life, the lines suggest an admission—couched in metaphor, but perhaps more frank than expected—that the unknowable will always remain so, right up to the final moment.

## II

Wayne Miller’s third book of poetry sometimes reads like a work that has taken on the daunting task of Being Important. This is certainly true in the opening poem, “A Prayer (O City—),” which consists of a series of portentous orations—“O arrow landed deep in Harold’s eye— // O voice / pressing upward against the sky— // O light and steam”—divided by parenthetical spurts of imagery that blend the lyrical with the crude:

(And our tables and demitasses,  
woofers and fire escapes,  
kisses in doorways, weapons  
and sculptures, concerts  
and fistfights, sex toys and votives,  
engines and metaphors—.)

The poem ends with an archaeologist examining a broken jar from “just after the Battle of Hastings.” It’s a detail that returns the poem to its opening lines, where King Harold II, in the midst of battle against William the Conqueror, has just lost his eye, his life, and the English throne.

Such are the stakes in *The City, Our City*, though they are not confined to medieval battlefields. Miller soon leaves eleventh-century England, setting most of the poems in an unnamed, quasi-mythic City whose anonymity and formlessness give him plenty of room to create and recreate it as he goes. As the book unfolds, so the city unfolds with it:

When a drop of water was found  
floating on the sand, they dug a well;

and soon streets opened outward  
from the core like petals

...

Then the City grew beautiful—

its nutlike center surrounded  
by boulevards and blocks and blocks

of rooms, and the top-floor windows  
were beacons to distant travelers—

The city’s progress, however, is far from linear, and often leaps backward and forward in time. The poem “The Feast” is situated in a church in early modern Europe, where “Nobles’ weapons // were blessed, and the dark wine / the people drank filled them of course // with God.” On the very next page, “Flooding the Valley” describes an evacuated city in the American Midwest being lifted whole in the midst of a controlled flood, the whole city “scaling the long / sides of the valley, dilating / as it rose toward the sky.” The poem “Street Fight” follows, in which two thoroughly drunk young men duke it out under a highway overpass. Not five pages later, Miller is back in Chaucer’s England, writing in the voice of a stricken man whose wife has just

died: “Blesse us Lorde / with soupe and wine, bread and water. . . And blesse Katheryn / with her long thin handes.”

In short, *The City, Our City* aims to capture a rather hefty slice of human history through a series of poems (or, if you prefer, a book-length poem interspersed with titles) that offer snapshots of lives, places, and events scattered throughout time and space. This is both a fantastic idea and, like many fantastic ideas, a difficult one to execute well. Such weighty titles as “A History of War,” “A History of Art,” and “The Death of the Frontier” are bound to raise the eyebrows of Miller’s more jaded readers, especially when it becomes clear that he is being only slightly tongue-in-cheek. Yet many of these poems are very well-executed indeed. “A History of War,” for instance, set in the trenches of the First World War, contains some imagery that would’ve made Wilfred Owen proud: “sleet // pricked the gas clouds, when / friends burst like wineskins, when / three days’ rain turned their fingers / all spongy and white.”

Miller also shows a flair for structural inventiveness. As surely befits a book that opens with an epigraph from that modern master of the circular narrative, Italo Calvino, the best poems in *The City, Our City* tend to move not forward but deeper. The poem “Those Boys,” in which a group of teenagers happens upon a freshly dug grave after a rainstorm, offers a striking illustration of this movement in its opening stanzas:

standing over the open grave  
full of rainwater, looking down into it—

into their bodies, their soccer jerseys  
thinned to smears on the surface,

the clouds drifting behind them  
and through the grave beneath

where they’re floating.

Here the perspective turns and turns again, the poem looking down with the boys into the reflective pool of rainwater, moving behind and beneath them to the clouds beyond. A few lines later, a plane glides behind the clouds, and the poem eventually ends where it began, with

“their reflections held // so precisely in the windless field—”. Such circularity is further evident in “[The child’s cry is a light that comes on in the house],” which calls to mind Wallace Stevens’ “The Idea of Order in Key West,” and whose stanzas are similarly rhythmic and ethereal. Stevens set the bar stratospherically high, of course, and Miller’s brief flights into those rarefied climates occasionally result in a voice that sounds less wise beyond its years than straining to be thought of as such.

For the most part, however, the language in this book is reliably sturdy. In the fields of “American Nocturne,” “cows sleep among the blind / pumpjacks weightlessly bowing”; a young girl’s cry is like “a lighthouse beam” that “swings around / and out of her body, flooding the window”; and in “Our Last Visit,” Manhattan’s Central Park is conjured in “chestnuts fleshy and charred” and “the cavernous nostrils of horses.” It is to Miller’s credit that *The City, Our City*, a lofty and far-ranging book, reads like it was built (as surely it was) brick by brick.

### III

It is tempting to talk about Jessica Fisher’s second volume (her first, *Frail-Craft*, won the Yale Series of Younger Poets Prize in 2006) not in terms of how it is written, but in terms of whom it will annoy. Lovers of consistency, for instance: the book is a mash-up of pithy stanzas, dense prose poems, and chopped-up lines and couplets, with a few words or phrases here and there spattered Pollock-like across the page. Punctuation tends to come and go. Readers who prefer poems that surrender their secrets on first reading will be disappointed as well. Take the prose poem “Firebird,” which opens, “From silence to the silenced bow, an interstitial stitch. We held our clapping hands until the tendons were the struts of wings, the fingers feather bones, and off they flew. Dart and shimmer, the lark.” Only in the second sentence does the poem give us something to grasp: the two fragments on either side are not so much bookends as they are stained-glass windows, letting in a bit of sound and color to keep the poem looking fresh, if not to move it forward.

Once she nails down a few subjects, however, Fisher’s poems take on a fuller shape. Most of the titles in this book are one-word ciphers (“Pare,” “Fathom,” “Familiar,” “Refract”) that, once unpacked, turn out to hold a surprising amount of meaning. “Firebird,” for instance, eventually resolves itself into a poem about an infant daughter’s fever,

“her brow like a hotplate beneath my palm, even her bare feet hot, no longer my body, and no longer hers—”, as Fisher imagines the child as a “firebird dancing the fever out against the white bedsheets, a first bright mark on that stretched and gessoed canvas—”. Images of birth and childhood dominate the book’s first half. The title poem begins with the speaker and her daughter “hunched in the croup tent, the kettle boiling,” and later submits an enigmatic verdict on the physical emptiness that comes with new motherhood: “when the inmost moves out, the body hollows— / an echo chamber.”

Several other poems throughout the book render the mystery of childbirth, if less directly. It is often conjured in just a single line or phrase, as in “Spell,” where Fisher borrows Samuel Johnson’s remark that the metaphysical poets’ ideas were “yoked by violence together,” and lets the reader draw what conclusions she will. Such gestures may border on coyness, but more often they simply suggest that the author is endeavoring to write poems that remain true to the spirit of her book’s title. Conversely, when Fisher occasionally ventures out, the results can be disappointing. The poem “Ravage,” which juxtaposes dreamlike scenes of children playing and intimations of war, has all the subtlety of Lyndon Johnson’s “Daisy” advertisement: “To the child learning her letters / each word stands for something. . . . V for Violin, W for Walrus / or Violence & War—.” In a later section of the poem, Fisher writes,

Child please know  
the eye is a weapon  
we are heavily armed

Say what you see

Avenger or Caliber  
in the vicinity

Avenger drones are terrifying weaponry, but one doubts that the author, a postdoctoral fellow at Berkeley, needs to worry about them doing any damage to the Bay Area.

On the other hand, Fisher’s willingness to appropriate the language of past masters, as she does with Johnson, produces some of the volume’s boldest pieces. “Bildungsroman” takes the kestrel of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem “The Windhover” and strips away its lyrical majesty to



reveal its humbler linguistic origins: “Have you watched the bird / the Renaissance called *windfucker* / beating its wings to keep still?” A more radical stripping away occurs in “Taken,” in which phrases are erased from a well-known untitled poem by John Keats (“This living hand, now warm and capable”) until all that remains is a handful of words floating in white space. Such experiments are not uniformly successful. They do, however, add depth and strength to a delicate book, one that not only demands rereading but merits it as well.

#### IV

One of the most memorable lines from Ira Sadoff’s *True Faith* comes in “America II,” in which the poet, watching the faces of visitors to downtown Manhattan’s Trinity Church, sees not transcendence but disquiet: “You can see / erosion in our expressions, as in a Bacon painting / where a face seems twisted by a scream // while the rest of the body minds its business.” Such is the subversion of Ira Sadoff. The simile arguably summons W. H. Auden’s line in *Musée des Beaux Arts*, in which “the torturer’s horse / Scratches its innocent behind on a tree,” and like Auden, Sadoff seems far more concerned with the odd little details than the main event.

Reading the first third or so of *True Faith*, one is likely to conclude that this is where the comparisons with Auden end, and that for Sadoff, innocence and guilt are nearly meaningless signifiers, drawn from a dusty moral lexicon that is more or less irrelevant, at least after the Sixties. Many of these poems bear the telltale marks of the New York School. Sadoff is a younger contemporary of the movement’s standard-bearers John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O’Hara, the last of whom he intentionally invokes in the opening lines of the poem “American”: “First time and only time I met LeRoi / we were standing at the Five Spot bar—summer ’61: / he was drunk, disgracefully so, which is why // he deigned to talk to me in my white oxford shirt.” The LeRoi of the poem is Amiri Baraka; the Five Spot is where Frank O’Hara remembers hearing Billie Holiday sing in “The Day Lady Died,” where “everyone and I stopped breathing.”

It’s a clever homage, and even as Sadoff plays up his white middle-class squareness in his conversation with Baraka, the poem places him among the literary legends of the New York school. Koch and Ashbery never actually appear in the poems, but they’re here; read Sadoff’s

poetry aloud and you can detect Koch's breathy tenor, and the clipped, otherworldly cadences of Ashbery and O'Hara. Many of Sadoff's poems are similarly garrulous, name-checking opera singers and 1950s screen idols, and clipping along in a desultory parade of wry observations and mockingly earnest questions. "Why was I in awe when the Romanian // took a chisel to the *Pietà*, and even if that's technically / not true, where's the joy in horseradish / that makes our eyes tear up? Why not throw a tantrum // as they break glass at the wedding party?" Sadoff asks in "Apologia." Why indeed. Such queries are clearly meant to be unanswerable, but in posing them Sadoff hints at an even more unanswerable (and much more interesting) question: Why do the things we say and do matter, and what makes certain behaviors more praise- or blameworthy than others? "Apologia," prudently, does not attempt an answer; instead it ends with a curious but telling metaphor, in which "those / who've been anointed to hear voices" are like "bees // under your pant leg that sting and sting, so even / when they're dead because they hurt you, the flesh / is still gristle, swelling and pulsing: that's where my god is."

This abrupt declaration hearkens back to the title of the book, and though it is doubtful that such an unusual brand of faith is "true" in any conventional sense, these lines nevertheless suggest that Sadoff is more vexed by the mysteries of religious belief than his opening poems might indicate. In those poems, god's death is not a question but a premise; the titular poem begins with the observation that "[t]rue faith belongs to the truly unstable," and the next poem, "In Madrid," begins with a similarly dismissive air: "When the Lord god went belly-up, out of business, / little brats went shin-kicking through the streets of Pamplona." Contrast these with the book's second part, whose first poem, "Orphans," opens with the line "I cannot fawn / Dear Lord," and whose second poem asks, "How did Yahweh / Become a still / Small voice and not / A thunderclap?" "Orphans" ends on a note of uncharacteristic ambiguity; after witnessing the faith-flushed faces of the traditionally religious, the speaker remarks, "I too want a bliss / Like theirs: / Blankened or beautied." The poet is far too worldly to buy whatever these believers are selling; were skepticism a church, Sadoff would have a decent shot at high priest. But to wrestle with religion is to acknowledge its power, for good or for ill, and a great deal of *True*

*Faith* is taken up with the question of what, exactly, is left—now that God has been crossed off the list—for one to have faith in.

Sadoff offers up several replacements, but they are all decoys. Poets have been known to call on nature for transcendence, for instance, and Sadoff is not entirely unsympathetic to such efforts. Yet he also suggests they are doomed to failure. In “Once I Could Say,” the speaker remarks that the singing of a house wren used to invoke “the beatific, // The breathlessness / In the patter of voice / Shaking the tamarind.” In “Like Magic,” when he stands by a stream and calls out to see if a tellingly capitalized “No One” can hear him, he startles a handful of geese into flight. A few pages later comes “The Aftermath,” where the springtime return of wrens and juncos prompts the tired rejoinder, “Who can bear those voices, all that singing?”

Not Sadoff, clearly, whose only subsequent encounter with a bird in *True Faith* is an old ceramic swan he holds onto because it reminds him “of muffins and cornbread // and a sour jug of milk.” This odd ornament also prompts the poem into an unexpected reverie that hazards an oblique answer to the book’s central question:

But there’s my father coming to tuck me in—  
I’m dreaming now—to beg forgiveness  
long after he’s dead. My forehead’s blessed.

Imagination’s a great gift: you can make it small,  
call it escapist, transcendent, fancy, and sometimes  
it walks away from the accident; it might haul you off

to a lush little meadow, or the muddy pond  
where yaks dip their tongues in the gatorless water  
where you can wash off the scratches and bruises.

The serene, antediluvian pastoral of that third stanza is wonderfully conjured, and provides what is possibly the fullest and least compromised portrait of joy in this world that *True Faith* is willing to offer. It may be a joy that only exists in the mind—those scratches and bruises will still be there, fresh as ever, when Sadoff’s dreaming speaker wakes—but nonetheless one is left with the distinct impression that the author remains a true believer in the mind’s potentialities, even if its creations tend to disappoint.

## V

Readers of Paisley Rekdal's fourth book do not have to wait long for its first animal eye to appear. In the opening poem, "Why Some Girls Love Horses," Rekdal recalls how a horse she used to ride as a child would frequently—and, it appears, intentionally—press down on the toe of her riding boots with its hoof while staring her down, "that hot / insistence with its large horse eye trained / deliberately on us, to watch—". Thus begins a fresh and visceral series of poems that explore what human traits tend to crop up in the animal kingdom (intelligence and cruelty, primarily) and under what circumstances humans end up behaving like animals. In that first poem, Rekdal's foot may be pinned under half a ton of horseflesh, but she "loved the horse for the pain it could imagine // and inflict on me," and later in the poem she admires that same conscious decision-making ability—"what was not slave or instinct, that when you turn to me / it is a choice, it is always a choice to imagine pleasure"—in the mind of the man she shares a bed with. It's an unexpected juxtaposition and a powerful one. It is also one of the last instances in the book where a human and an animal are placed in the same poem and both come off the better for it.

To put it another way, in *Animal Eye* people often get the short end of the stick. The poem "An Enemy," for instance, takes its title from a mother's mispronunciation of "anemone" at a local aquarium. Having noted this error, Rekdal spends much of the rest of the poem marveling at the otherworldly beauty of the aquarium's marine denizens, a beauty that carries with it a frisson of danger, especially compared with the humans who gape at the aquatic creatures before the glass of the tanks. The passage is so lush and strange that it is worth quoting in full:

Bat rays shadow the surface of the tank  
through coves of orange-cupped coral; sea pens and sunflower stars,  
frilled kelp maroon as cabbage peel where parents

point out features that will thrill: this fish with a face

wider than a child's, that with its snout  
shaped like a needle, another with a set of canine teeth  
so sharp one father has to reassure  
his little girl, *Don't worry: they don't like*

*the taste of humans*, though what animal,  
famished, death-pressed, can't learn? The octopus

is quick enough to pick a lock . . .

Reading this, one senses that were Rekdal given a choice between a world full of toddlers or anemones, she wouldn't have much trouble making up her mind. At the very least, the lavish descriptions of fish, birds and mammals in *Animal Eye*—the octopus that “skirls / through grays and pinks / of rippled light,” or a magpie with “blue bands // vibrant against the oil black” and “feet like rotted arteries”—suggest that the author finds all the lyrical inspiration she needs in the natural world. Plenty of the shorter poems here are likewise fixated on animals being animals. “A Small, Soul-Colored Thing” presents a surreal, almost dreamlike encounter on the highway with a dog that has just killed a deer; and Rekdal's awed description of the midair coupling of insects in “Dragonfly” presents a sharp contrast with the poem “Intimacy,” which half-jokingly begins, “How horrible it is, how horrible.”

Rekdal may be flirting with misanthropy here, but flirtation is as far as she is willing to go. The world inhabited by the animals of *Animal Eye* is invariably shared with humans. The focus of the poem “Nightingale,” for instance, is not the bird itself, but a boy who listens for its song, a boy whose own voice is “the song / of a man strapped to his mast, straining / and tearing at the straps that bind him.” The real meat of this book, moreover, is buried in two long poems, “Wax” and “Easter in Lisbon,” that together comprise nearly half of its eighty pages, and that present a much more nuanced inquiry into what separates the human from the animal. “Easter in Lisbon” begins with a terrifying encounter at the Lisbon Zoo, where the speaker watches in bemused horror as the zoo's adult lemurs use their babies “like little vacuums” to collect food from beyond the bars, only to snatch the food from their mouths when they return. At heart, however, the poem is a chronicle of its speaker's romance with a young African-American man during the Los Angeles race riots, a time and place where such relationships were viewed with suspicion if not outright hostility. When Rekdal returns to the zoo at the end of the poem, it is only in her imagination: the animals have all escaped, including an enormous tiger (“its stripes, / against the dark gold hide and white underfur, // like black icicles”) that ends up in a Lisbon suburb, where it gazes through a window at a couple at home,

who gaze back at it, “eye // to eye, animals to animal, / struck dumb not by fear of each other / so much as the *unlikeliness* of it all.”

“Easter in Lisbon” is preceded by “Wax,” which Rekdal subtitles “Family portrait with French Revolution and cancer.” Beyond the “crab-like” hand of a wax statue and a “trout-faced resident” who accompanies a doctor giving the speaker’s family some hard news, the poem is mostly devoid of animals—just people who, whether by choice or force of circumstance, end up acting like them. The perspectives from which *Animal Eye* is written may not be pretty. But they are convincing, and they are rendered with an unflinching eye for detail that arguably makes this book Rekdal’s best to date.