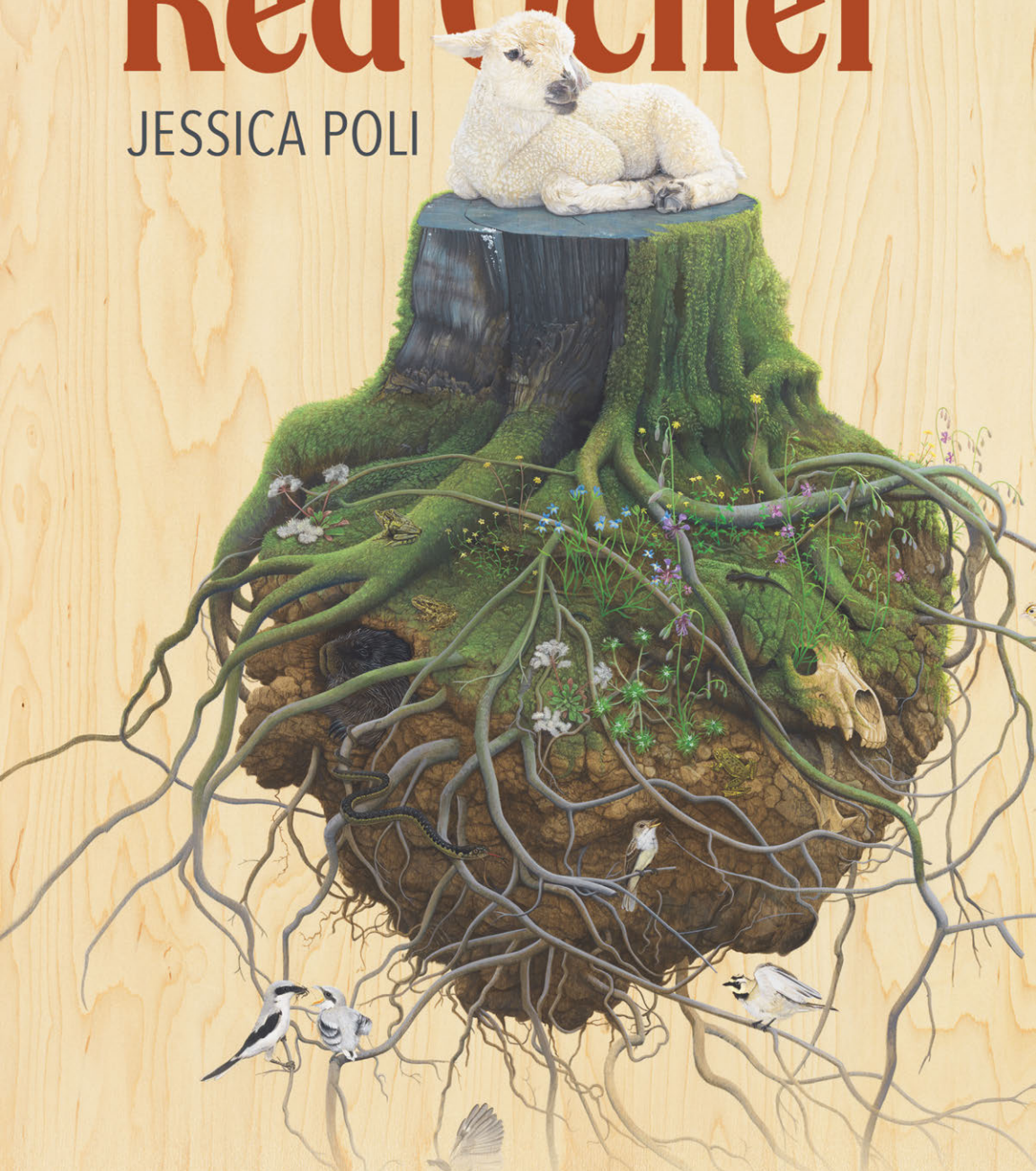


# Red Ocher

JESSICA POLI



FINALIST FOR THE 2023 MILLER WILLIAMS POETRY PRIZE  
SELECTED BY PATRICIA SMITH

# RED OCHER

Miller Williams Poetry Series  
EDITED BY PATRICIA SMITH

# RED OCHER



Jessica Poli

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## SERIES EDITOR'S PREFACE

So you'd think, in the second year of my three-year term as Miller Williams Poetry Prize series editor, that I've clicked into a rhythm, undaunted by the hundreds of spectacular submissions flooding my inbox, and reliant on my stellar crew of screeners—all schooled in my exacting standards—to sift through all the goodness and present me with fifty stunners, from which I pluck the three clear winners, each one having risen to the top of the pile with the relentlessness of a north star.

Whew. *That* is overwritten.

But really—I'm not sure how folks picture this task, but it is, in turns, mystifying, exhilarating, and utterly impossible.

At the very heart of the difficulty is that age-old question, *What makes a good poem?* I have been confronted with that pesky query hundreds of times—served up by grade-schoolers, bookstore patrons, confounded undergrads, reading groups, festivalgoers, workshop participants, curious onlookers, byliners and bystanders, and folks just looking to make conversation when I tell them what I do. (And no—it's not just you—it took a *long* time before I was able to state “I am a poet” without tacking on something that felt legitimizing and more jobby, like “. . . oh, and a greeter at Walmart.”)

What makes a good poem depends very much on who's doing the reading, when they're doing the reading, and issues and insight they brought to the table before starting to read. It's insanely subjective. At the beginning of my appointment as series editor (I almost said “at the beginning of my reign”—must be the scepter Billy Collins passed down to me), I was asked what kind of poems constituted the books I'd be looking for. Here's what I said:

I love poems that vivify and disturb. No matter what genre we write in, we're all essentially storytellers—but it's poets who toil most industriously, telling huge unwieldy stories within tight and gorgeously controlled confines, stories that are structurally and sonically adventurous, and it's magic every time it happens. Simply put, when I read a poetry book, I want something to shift in my chest. I want my world to change.

That obviously was one bridge too far for a few folks, who wailed on social media—the primary forum for wailing—that my standards were merely



unattainable. One incensed Tweeter (or is it “Tweeterer”?) was particularly riled by the “shift in my chest / world change” thing.

Who in their right mind believes that poetry can actually change the world? THIS world? Why are we teaching our younguns such lofty dribble? Why should the average poet submit a manuscript with absolutely no chance of shifting anything in this strange woman’s chest? Alas, come down from that mountain, Madam Editor—can mere mortals get a break?

I want to repeat—and clarify—that good poetry should not leave you the same as when you came to it. I see that as a relatively simple ask on the part of the poet:

*I have a story. It's a familiar story, but I'm going to tell it in a way you haven't heard before. I want to give the story to you. Take it with you. Live it.*

*Now my story is part of your story.*

You’d be amazed at how many things I’ve felt that way about. The way Boo screeches “Kitty!” at the end of the film *Monsters, Inc.* A hard-rhymed scrawl by a sixth grader at Lillie C. Evans Elementary School in the Liberty City section of Miami. A poem written by a student of mine at Princeton—structured like an application form, it morphed into a heartbreaking and revealing piece about his being embarrassed by his aging mother. The children’s book *Don’t Let the Pigeon Ride the Bus!*. Everything ever penned by Gwendolyn Brooks. The one and only poem written by a reticent mumbler in my Staten Island Intro to Creative Writing class, because it was his one and only poem and he said he’d never write a poem at all. “Antarctica Considers Her Explorers” by Diane Ackerman. The song “Ooo Baby Baby” as crooned by one Smokey Robinson.

I say all that to say this: I am moved by many things, none of them perfection. None of them haughty or precise or manipulative. None of them professional or studied or “officially sanctioned” in any way. I seldom know what I need until it has arrived. I do know that that shift in my chest, that rock to my world, can come from anywhere—somewhere simple, somewhere complex. Anywhere a moment, a voice, a song, or a poem reaches out and finds someone.

I can assure you that the three winners of this year’s Miller Williams series are all—I’ve checked—mere mortals. Each one took a different road to reach me; each one changed my world in a different way. There is no one voice, and there is no one way to hear a voice.

Let’s look at the winners, from third to first, from runners-up to crown, Miss America style.

*Red Ocher* by Jessica Poli is a lush collision of aubade, cento and ghazal, poems that snug cozily into forms that were born waiting for them, poems that pulse outward from a relentless core of sensuality and heartbreak to embody what nature does to us. I am wholly envious of Jessica, because I find such concise lyricism to be difficult to manage. And having grown up surrounded by concrete and hard edges where pigeons were the only wildlife, I can't help but be mesmerized by a poem like "The Morning After"—

When I opened the door to the coop  
and saw three chickens and a mallard lying dead  
  
in the soggy pine chips, I thought the raccoon  
had made clean kills of all the birds it wanted  
  
in the night. So forgive me if I shouted  
when I walked into the yard and saw the duck  
  
standing motionless, head covered in blood,  
a marble statue after a war.

What's stamped on me, what follows me into my dreaming, is the instance after, the necessary sacrifice of the dying duck, who flees, headless, "before it stopped / and sank to the ground where its neck arced / and swung, mourning itself."

What I'm changed by is the breath I hold in from the beginning of the title poem "Red Ocher":

To paint the barn bloody.  
  
After all that planting, the peppers rot off the vine.  
  
Wind was once oil. Soil has memories.  
  
What's lost in the retelling.  
  
To fall apart or believe.  
  
The farmer, filling the wheelbarrow with sawdust, remembering last  
year's weather: *That was a different God.*  
  
What the wasp dragging its half-severed tail knows about sorrow.