

# The Way Things Really Are

*David Middleton*

*Cleaning the Well: Poems Old and New*  
by Paul Ruffin (Granite Falls, MN: Ellis  
Press, 2008)

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When the Texas state legislature named Paul Ruffin the 2009 poet laureate of Texas, Julia May wrote of him in Sam Houston State University's *Heritage* magazine: "He loves football, shooting, riding his tractor, keeping up his truck, and doing his own carpentry, electrical, and plumbing work, and he is a long-time member of the National Rifle Association—not exactly the stereotypical image of a person who also loves words and is a master of arranging them into beautifully crafted poems and other literary works."

Born in the small town of Millport, Alabama, Ruffin moved at age seven to Mississippi, where he lived with his family in a rural area near Columbus. His father, who had been a sharecropper, worked on an assembly line. The family grew up poor and had no indoor plumbing until Ruffin was in his teens. Describing himself as a loner, Ruffin says he spent much of his time in the woods beside the Luxapalila River. More so than many poets, Ruffin can pinpoint his beginnings as a writer. Calling boredom his "dark angel," Ruffin remembers long Assembly of God church

services on Sundays and Wednesdays when he would memorize the words of hymns in the *Broadman Hymnal*—unless, as he confesses, he was "flicking BBs into beehive hairdos" of church ladies seated nearby.

Later, Ruffin studied poetry at Mississippi State University, where he developed his writing style while earning first a B.S. and then an M.A. in English. He also holds a Ph.D. from the University of Southern Mississippi. Eventually, Ruffin began teaching at Sam Houston State University in Huntsville, Texas, and there he has spent most of his academic career. In addition to his own works in verse and prose fiction, Ruffin is widely known as the founding editor of the *Texas Review* and founding director of Texas Review Press, positions he still holds today. In addition to being poet laureate, Ruffin has been honored as Texas State University System Regents Professor and Distinguished Professor of English.

Ruffin has stated that Robert Frost is the greatest influence on his poetry. Such influence can be seen in his devotion to character, symbolic narratives, and a poetic diction that creates a poem at once simple and profound, understandable on a first reading but yielding further ranges of meaning to perceptive readers who return to the poems. As Ruffin has said, "Too many poets like to be obscure. . . . The fact is that anybody can write poems that can't be understood. . . . The challenge is to write poetry that can be understood and appreciated on one level and yet possess sufficient depth to appeal to a more critical audience, and that's what I try to do."

*Cleaning the Well: Poems New and Old* gathers together the work of many years. Ruffin divides the book into four sections: The Girls, The Boys, The Land and the Sea and All the Pretty Children, and A Miscellany. The poems address such themes as the complementary differences between men and women, family, love,

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nature, initiation experiences, the hard facts of agrarian life (Ruffin has raised cattle), and a critique of certain aspects of modernity and the university. What unites these remarkable poems is the impression that Ruffin has directly experienced and can powerfully communicate in plain and moving speech certain fundamental truths about human life—the way things really are.

The first section (*The Girls*), as its title indicates, is about the nature of women not only as women are in themselves but almost of necessity in their relationships with men. In “*The Woman and Blood*,” a husband fusses worrisomely over a finger cut by a pocketknife. His wife has limited sympathy because, as she says, “Men know so little of blood.” The poem ends with the husband observing: “He watches her, this creature he loves, / mother of his children, / who knows blood the way he never can, / the secret and the surface, / the crust and sacred wine, / moved by the seasons and the moon. / He bears his little pain, turns to his affairs, / finger throbbing, napkin stained.”

Celebrating motherhood, “*The Mystery for the Magus*,” spoken by one of the Wise Men, focuses not on the uniqueness of Christ’s Incarnation (which is affirmed) but on the common and universal experience of motherhood and the mother’s unqualified love for a new child, whether uniquely divine or merely human: “Chosen as a vessel of life as she always is, / woman, this woman, did not question how / the thing had happened, would not have cared / that the child before her might in his time / herd camels or fling nets for fish / or as a girl-child gather olives / or slave at making bread, / and nightly bear the weight of a man.” The poem closes magnificently with lines inclusive of every mother and newborn child: “The love I witnessed there / was no more than

I had seen elsewhere, / and the star in time I saw as any other / beneath which a woman beamed / upon what she had delivered, / wet with her blood and wearing / a divine glow, her eyes the first / and only heaven that child might ever know.”

The contemporary debate over the natures of women and men is dramatized in the paired poems “*Sam Johnson Says to the Feminist*” and “*The Feminist Answers Sam Johnson*.” In the first poem, the male speaker remarks to the woman that it is pointless to resist “the laws of nature / older by far than any of you. / Woman was always food and fire and water bowl, / designed to cook and clean / and tend the pretty children[.]” In the second poem, in reply, the feminist retorts by defining men: “You are all muscle and bone, hair and sweat, / designed to run and kill and capture, / then drag your wounded length back to us / for patching and for soothing.” As to tending those things mentioned earlier, the woman replies: “Food and fire and water bowl is / what we were designed for? / When all is said and done, it is we, / who have nurtured you from first light, / who will gather about the ruins of you, / use our fire to render you, then / wash and dry our brightest bowl / to stir your cold gray ashes in.”

This battle-dance of the sexes is resolved in the delightful poem “*Passing Nasty Notes at the Academic Conference*” (*SCMLA Conference, Biloxi, circa 1988*). A husband and wife, “away from the children two days,” sit at a table near “[s]omber scholars” looking at papers they will soon read. Now middle-aged but still moved to a degree by passion, the couple “care nothing for fad approaches: / Freudian or Marxist or feminist, / the one hundred new positions. / We are not into deconstruction.” Instead, he passes her a note suggesting an upstairs rendezvous in their room: “We finish our drinks and smile, / and I lead her by

the hand/to the elevator, past those serious/heads nodding at their papers./ We will learn nothing new where we are going,/ and deliver nothing new. Yet something/will tremble in the universe,/ stars will flash and tumble,/ in our small season suns will spin./ We will leave no mark here,/ take nothing home to tell the others./ The doors close and we ascend.”

Section 2 (The Boys) begins with two poems on the nature of young males. “Boy” recounts a young man’s love of speed—first running, then horseback riding, and now driving a car. He does what a boy becoming a man has always done: “A thousand, ten thousand years/ in the making, but never finished,/ he is *boy*, built for speed,/ running, ever running/ toward or away from something,/ a force like the wind itself,/ untamed and untamable,/ cursed to be motion forever.” In “The Old Game: Boy in Training,” the poet sees sports as a preparation for the traditional roles of the male: “With glove and bat or pads and helmet/ he trains for the day when in dark forest/ or on the smoking field, facing/ tooth and claw or enemy armed with steel/ he will dash, as he must by ancient law,/ into the way of harm and do his duty[.]”

A denigrated version of such a male is the subject of “Redneck with Hair on His Back”: “he is little more than an upright ape/ who has learned the alphabet./ With his woman he is not gentle,/ preferring her in her anxious state,/ taking her when he will, and/ the children fear his thundering voice.” Conversely, an educated, mature man in “He Muses on the General Nature of Things” refuses to accept a purely scientific explanation of love and passion as no more than “the restless riot/ and rout of chemistry and cells[.]” Instead, he asks why that which “surges in him,/ in blood and heart and brain,/ defies logic and skips past the science of it all/ and hammers him

day in and day out,/ night in and night out,/ like some old haunt beyond reckoning/ that cannot be explained?”

Finally, in “At Eighty He Speaks of Beauty and Truth” an aging academic, now retired and forgetful at his birthday party of the names and faces of former students and younger family members, falls back simply on the love he has for his wife of many years who now will nurse him. Unable to remember lines of poems he loves, he is comforted by his wife and, in the end, does manage to recall the last line of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn”: “‘It is all right,’ she says,/ patting his head softly./ He looks at her and smiles,/ and somewhere in the dark of his mind/ a vision of a goddess rises,/ her hair streaming with bright water./ ‘Children,’ he says, his eyes / sharp on the face before him,/ ‘this woman is all I know on earth,/ and all I need to know.’”

Section 3 (The Land and the Sea and All the Pretty Children) concerns the growing up of children from innocence into experience and a corresponding maturation in our understanding of certain immutable laws of nature and the necessary human relationship to nature. “In Your Innocent Age” is about his daughter’s third birthday. He says to his daughter that now “Time/ flutters about you like some/ butterfly drunk on sun and air” but this will not last: “No: the soul, which in its dark/ age stumbles mute and blind / or in youth dances and sings,/ knows the crossing of the shadow,/ the rush of terrible wings.” In “Dressing Up,” the poet as father accepts the inevitable: his daughter’s putting on her mother’s clothes as a rehearsal for the passage from childhood innocence into adulthood. For now she is “lost in her mother’s summer dress,/ gloves and high heels and hat,/ swallowed by what she will grow into.”

Similarly, in “My Son at Communion,”

his son, five, not yet able to take communion publicly, cannot be prevented from enacting his own private Mass at home: “‘This is the body,’ he says, not knowing/I watch, ‘and this is the blood.’/He slides the cracker onto his tongue and chews,/drains down the juice, wipes the lip/of the glass with his shirt sleeve./He bows and whispers a prayer/as I back from the silent, holy room,/struck with the need to believe.”

This movement from innocence to experience in children is matched by experiences in nature that reveal Ruffin as a realistic agrarian writer. In “Burying,” a newborn calf whose mother has died is placed with another cow about to give birth: “I . . . fed him/by bottle until another cow came due, then/moved him in with her for suckling./Third night she broke his neck./It was a right and natural thing to do:/She reasoned her milk was for hers alone.” The poet is then forced to finish off the suffering calf and bury it without romantic sentimentality: “I felt neither/fear nor sorrow, love nor hate. I felt/the slick handle of the shovel, slid/my thumb over its bright steel blade,/breathed deep the sharp and necessary air.”

Another of several other such powerful poems is “Root Pruning.” Here, in order to force a tree to produce fruit and seed, the poet must do violence to its feeder roots: “I feel the blade stop,/gather strength, slice through / roots as slender as veins/matted on a lover’s lids.// There is no love in this:/It is not a gentle procedure./I can see in your barren limbs/against the sky that awful need/begin, the primal racial fear:/ that blessed rage for seed.”

The fourth and final section (A Miscellany) contains the title poem and other poems that, as the word *miscellany* suggests, sum up the major themes already developed in earlier poems and sections, but then the poet goes beyond to an

ominous conclusion. “Cleaning the Well” is a male initiation poem whose characters are a grandfather and his grandson. The grandfather lowers the grandson into the well by a rope to clear it of debris—“It’s got to be done. Let’s go,” the grandfather says. At the bottom of the well, the young boy’s courage and resolve are tested as he brings up all sorts of polluting items: “a rubber ball, pine cones, leather glove,/beer can, fruit jars, an indefinable bone.” Once pulled back to the surface, the boy tells the grandfather what he had to leave behind: “a cat or possum skeleton, but it/broke up, I couldn’t pick it up.” The grandfather replies wisely: “‘There’s always something down there/you can’t quite get in your hands.’” The poem ends with the grandfather’s words about the secretiveness of such initiations: “‘You’ve drunk all that cat/you’re likely to drink. Forget it,/and don’t tell the others. It’s just/one more secret you got to live with.’” Like several other poems throughout the volume, this poem uses immersion in water as a symbol of experience and encounter with the unknown, mysterious, and threatening, yet also sometimes the reviving and restorative elements in nature as well as in the depths of the self and in human relationships.

Ruffin closes the fourth section and the volume with two bleakly prophetic poems. “The Practice Is Over, Tom Hardy” plays off Thomas Hardy’s famous “Channel Firing,” a poem about gunfire practice during naval maneuvers in the English Channel just prior to World War I. Ruffin fears that an even more terrible war—a nuclear war—may one day do much more damage to Salisbury Plain than the thundering naval guns of 1914: “It will be warmer then indeed:/the Judgment will be known at last,/when Stourton Tower poofs like Camelot/and Stonehenge melts like glass.” The collection’s final poem, “To the Twenty-First Century,” begins

with a similar twist, this time on the well-known nursery rhyme “Little Boy Blue.” The original poem (taken by some as in part an implicit attack on Cardinal Wolsey’s ostentatious lifestyle) is as follows: “Little Boy Blue come blow your horn. / The sheep’s in the meadow the cow’s in the corn. / But where’s the boy who looks after the sheep? / He’s under a haystack fast asleep. / Will you wake him? No, not I—for if I do, he’s sure to cry.”

Here is a disruption, through inattention and laziness, of humanity’s rightful relationship to and ordering of the natural world. In Ruffin’s poem, the poet calls on the boy to wake up and blow his horn as an alarm, yet the poem ends with a dark foreboding that the ongoing human abandonment of the agrarian life for the excesses of industrialism and a lethal technology may well lead to oblivion: “Up and blow, boy, blow to / the skies, but know that your / tune is lost on casual green and blue. / As you wish, stand and blow, / though bronze to iron to atom / to dreamless sleep is the way / that this story will go.” But dire as such a prophecy is, the way to avoid it is also, by implication both here and in other poems, clearly indicated.

Paul Ruffin is one of those poets—all too rare—whose poems are full of wisdom and just ring true to life so that the reader, unless blindly committed to some radical ideology out of harmony with natural law and universal human experience, must simply say that this is the way life is and act accordingly. In my prefatory remarks as poetry editor for *Modern Age* (“In the Beginning: A Note from the Poetry Editor,” Winter 2008, pages 58–60), I quoted a list of fourteen benchmarks for a successful poem compiled by Ruffin’s fellow Alabama-born poet John Finlay (1941–1991), who also knew country life in the rural South. Of those points, the following stands out prominently in relation

to Ruffin’s verse: “It must be of the physical world, have winter mornings, summer nights, stripped trees, creeks, smoke, smells, the reflection of a star in a bucket of water, etc. in it so that the reader will say, ‘Oh, yes, this is just the way it really is.’”

## An Unflinching Defense of Modernism

*Jeffrey Folks*

*What Ever Happened to Modernism?* by  
Gabriel Josipovici (New Haven and  
London: Yale University Press, 2010)

Every so often a book comes along that, while faulty in overall conception, addresses crucial issues in an especially productive way. Gabriel Josipovici’s *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* is a flawed but quite thoughtful effort to vindicate an aesthetic vision—that of high modernism—that few would now defend in such an unreserved manner. In the course of this defense, Josipovici forces the reader to confront essential aesthetic and moral questions and to clarify his own thinking in relation to the philosophical assumptions that underlie modernist art. In this respect, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?*

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