In one of the last poems in her 2005 collection *Overlord*, Jorie Graham recounts an encounter that haunts the poems of *Sea Change* (Ecco, 2008). Sitting in her office on an unremarkable day, when “Outside the trees seem healthy to me, and the street is filled / with human busyness,” the speaker of “Praying (Attempt of April 19 ’04)” is accosted by a weeping student, “In her right hand an updated report on global warming.” Terrified by a future that we are more and more robustly confident is our own, the student expresses her bewilderment at the lack of terror she sees around her: “‘where are all the / others’ she is crying, ‘why does no one know, why / is this not being reported.’” But the issue, of course, is not one of the availability of knowledge (especially in the university setting of this poem) but rather the failure of our willingness to receive it—a failure the poem acknowledges in its digressions, carrying us far away from the girl in the doorway whose image causes the speaker such pain: “Writing this / has been a very long detour I know.”

“Praying (Attempt of April 19 ’04)” is, like many of the poems in *Sea Change* and like much of Graham’s work in general, largely penitential, the story of personal as well as societal failure. Mindful of another student’s recent suicide, of the fact that “One must be so careful / re the disappearance of hope,” the speaker offers as consolation a conscious falsehood: “I said to the girl / it would be all right in the end. Not to worry.” The speaker’s guilt inheres not only in the lie she offers her student, and not only in her individual responsibility for leading an environmentally irresponsible existence (as surely we all do), but also in her own greatest gifts as a poet, gifts toward which she has held an odd, sometimes fruitful ambivalence throughout her career: “Oh Lord what do I do with the great desire to praise. / The frenzied joy of detail.” Such joy, many of the poems in *Sea Change* suggest, may not
be what the moment most requires; instead, “Someone must implore. / Someone must expect yield.” One of the great challenges Sea Change sets for itself is finding a way to reconcile this “joy of detail” with the pressures of grief and grievance, of a moral and political urgency so fierce that the aesthetic might be expected to wither before it. “And but he’s something stained / With grief (that’s beauty’s canker),” says Prospero of Ferdinand in a scene crucial to the imagination of this collection, “thou mightst call him / A goodly person.” “Praying” approaches its end with a series of exhortations:

Don’t tell her she’s wrong when she comes to your doorsill.
Let her weep. Do not comfort. Do not give false hope.
Tell her to tell the others. Let the dream of contagion set loose its virus.

The poems of Sea Change are spoken from within the grip of such a virus. Like Coleridge’s wedding guest ineluctably changed by encounter, the speaker of this book seems, in her anger and grief (“that’s beauty’s canker”), in some way to have become the student hovering in the doorway, waving her “facts on the sheet in her right hand,” overcome with urgent speech, “hardly able to find a normal breath.”

I

In shouldering the topic of global climate change, Graham is charting territory almost unvisited by our major American poets. The last years of the Bush administration have seen something of a renaissance of political poetry on the American scene: perhaps not since the Vietnam War have so many of our poets spoken out on public themes. Although the aesthetic results of this effort have not always been heartening, it marks a valuable correction of the retreat to the psychic interior that has characterized much of the central strain of American poetry in the three decades since the death of Robert Lowell. In the last year, Beloit Poetry Journal, Volt, and Poetry Northwest, surely among many others, have devoted entire issues to political poetry. In recent collections, Frank Bidart, Henri Cole, John Koethe, Alan Shapiro, and Robert Hass—none of them “political poets” in any sense, some of them among the least public of our writers—have turned to public themes. A sense of
national shame has become characteristic of our poetry, as of much of our public discourse in general.

But very few of these poets have devoted their attention to global warming. The only poem in any of these collections addressing what we think we know about our future is Robert Hass’s “State of the Planet,” from *Time and Materials*, which won the Pulitzer prize this year. When I asked friends and colleagues to help me think of other poems addressing climate change we came up with none; this is not to say, of course, that none exists. This apparent lack of poems on the subject is remarkable. Surely no other issue is so crucial as climate change to the survival of our species, as we are seeing in its first, already devastating effects. The only other vision of our own destruction comparable in credibility is nuclear annihilation, and even this seems finally less terrifying than global warming—which, while due to human agency, is not dependent upon human will. There is no intelligence here to warn away from a trigger, and it is difficult to gaze upon a future devastation that seems so much like fate. “One must be so careful / re the disappearance of hope.”

Another reason for the dearth of poems on the topic may quite simply be the difficulty of comprehending it. *Sea Change* relies far more on research than we have come to expect of poetry collections, and on occasion the difficulty of that research is thematized. Consider this sentence from “Positive Feedback Loop”:

In Hell they empty your hands of sand, they tell you to refill them with dust and try
to hold in mind the North Atlantic Deep Water which also contains
contributions from the Labrador Sea and entrainment of other
water masses, try to hold a
complete collapse, in the North Atlantic Drift, in the
thermohaline circulation, this
will happen,
fish are starving to death in the Great Barrier Reef, the new Age of
Extinctions is
now…

The problem of understanding is not one so much of the accumulation of facts (“entrainment of other water masses,” “thermohaline circulation”)
as of the grasping of systems, understanding the world as a mechanism of interlocked dependences. The difficulty of “hold[ing] in mind” (a phrase suggestive of the root meaning of *comprehension*) such systems, of imagining their interlockedness in an attempt to find the “Tipping point, flash / point” that will establish the positive feedback loop of the title, is here likened to a torment (a particularly inventive torment) to be suffered “In Hell.”

The danger of so heavily researched a book is that its wealth of information will skitter past unregistered, part of the blur of what the *New York Times* has recently bemoaned as “green noise,” the incessant, frequently contradictory (but all heavily researched) information accompanying the latest exhortation to right environmental action. These poems escape such deadening by, first, refraining from exhortation, and also by their investment in worldly particulars. The poems are hugely digressive, and show all of the range and the commitment to minute, frame-by-frame description of experience that have characterized nearly all of Graham’s mature work. They are poems that, as Helen Vendler wrote of Graham’s work over a decade ago, “resemble cloud chambers full of colliding protons rather than well-wrought urns.” But this chaotic, sometimes inscrutably associative movement in the poems is anchored, in the best pieces here, by an unremarkable discrete action, a glimpse of a daily life. And features of a particular landscape (a tree, a barbed-wire fence) recur again and again in these poems, the local focus of their global elegy.

The most effective of these images is also the simplest. The book’s first poem, “Sea Change,” ends with the staking of a young tree, an image of care that similarly anchors the collection. The poem begins by recounting a day of unnaturally high winds:

One day: stronger wind than anyone expected. Stronger than ever before in the recording of such. Un-natural says the news. Also the body says it. Which part of the body—I look down, can feel it, yes, don’t know where. Also submerging us, making of the fields, the trees, a cast of characters in an unnegotiable
drama, ordained, iron-gloom of low light, everything at once undoing itself.

Much of the style of the book is evident in these opening lines: the movement from short fragments to long (often very long) breathless sentences; the dissection of sensation (“Which part of the body”); the stuttering interjections (“can / feel it, yes”); the already fragmented syntax broken further by radical enjambments (“un- / natural”); the quick snatches of ravishing lyricism (“iron-gloom of low light”), appearing suddenly and often immediately withdrawn.

Much attention has been paid to the physical shape of these poems. Alternating long, left-justified lines with short lines hitched to an axis at the middle of the page, the poems inhabit a cycle that seems accommodating of endless and shifting interpretations: plenty and scarceness, will and surrender, ambition and exhaustion, the tension between “openness” and “shape” that Vendler identified long ago as the “central theme” of Graham’s poetics. Graham herself, in a comment that accompanied one of these poems in *Poetry* magazine, has said that the form “marries” the long line of Whitman to the short line of Williams, poets she identifies with an “utopian poetics” of American democracy. (As William Logan has pointed out, reviewing *Sea Change* in *The New Criterion*, Williams did not always use a short line—and in fact his late, long-lined meditations, burdened as they often are with fear of another version of human-engineered global destruction, nuclear war, seem closer kin to Graham’s recent poems.) But these poems are anything but utopian, alternating as they do between a guilty joy in present abundance and despair for the future. What the lines most consistently represent, as in all lyric poems, is breath, its taking-in and release visible in the turnings of the verse. In the irregularity of her lines, then, Graham reminds us of the student from “Praying (Attempt of April 19 ’04)”: in the grip of despair, she is incapable of “normal breath.”

In “Sea Change,” it is not only the speaker’s breath that is disordered. As the wind beats “against the shutters [she] / [has] now fastened again,” the speaker listens to what she imagines the wind to be saying:

… here it is now, carrying its North
Atlantic windfall, hissing Consider
the body of the ocean which rises every instant into
me, & its
ancient evaporation, & how it delivers itself

to me, how the world is our law …

The voice continues, expressing its own insentient wonder at the mechanisms of which it is a part:

… wonder is also what

pours from us when, in the
coiling, at the very bottom of
the food
chain, sprung
from undercurrents, warming by 1 degree, the in-
dispensable
plankton is forced north now, & yet farther north,
spawning too late for the cod larvae hatch, such
that the hatch will not survive, nor the
species in the end, in the right-now forever un-
interruptible slowing of the
gulf
stream, so that I …

Here the singular pronoun (compare to the plural “us” in the second line) marks the return of the poet’s voice, the shift having occurred somewhere silently in the preceding lines. It is difficult to feel the force of these lines without the material presence of the book, with its margins that are much wider than can be represented here. The movement from the narrow to the broad combines with the eeriness of the voice to give a sense of joyful, destructive freedom, something of the flavor that Vergil, in an episode that serves as backdrop to this passage, gives the freeing of the winds in the first book of the Aeneid.

The odd animism evident here is a frequent element of Graham’s descriptions, where landscape seems always on the cusp of personification:

… the walls, the bent back ranks of trees
all stippled with these slivers of
light like
breaking grins—infinities of them—wriggling along the walls, over the
grasses—mouths
reaching into
other mouths—sucking out all the air—huge breaths passing to and fro between the unkind blurrings— …

As often in Graham’s work, description serves as a means for tightening the string of the self, ratcheting-up the pitch of the voice (“Tun[ing] the instrument,” as Donne has it in “Hymn to God my God, in my Sickness”) to an ecstasy that more often than not results in fragmentation, evident here in the frequent irruptions of dashes. This fragmentation allows for the dramas of other voices to usurp the poems: in these pages speech is given not only to wind, but to shine, flood, air, path, even evaporation. Here, in the final lines of “Sea Change,” the wind resumes its narration:

… & quicken me further says this new wind, &
according to thy judgment, &
I am inclining my heart towards the end,
I cannot fail, this Saturday, early pm, hurling myself,
wiry furies riding my many backs, against your foundations and your best young

In its sudden leap to archaic, hieratic diction, quoting from the King James translation of Psalm 119, the poem suggests a concomitant metaphysical leap toward a belief that might subtend hope, whatever the material realities we face. It is a leap these poems attempt often; characteristically, this diction is juxtaposed with far more worldly tones (“this Saturday, early pm”), and the final lines return us decisively to a shared earthly experience. The final lines also show the melding of the wind’s voice with that of the speaker: while the final image of human care is seen from an inhuman vantage, the description of “your / best young / tree” is rooted in the perspective of the keeper of the habitation the wind hurls itself against. The image of the staked tree, of a tender and tending action repeated (“to stake again”) in the face of what seems like hostility, recurs and is amplified in other poems.

In Sea Change, Graham freights her descriptions of the natural world with urgency by directing them toward future readers inhabiting
a very different reality: “You will not believe it,” she writes in “No Long Way Round,” the book’s last poem, “when the time / comes. Also how we mourned our dead—had / ample earth, took time, opened it, closed / it.” In “Loan,” she describes the moments after a rain shower for future readers who may, she imagines, need careful testimony of such a phenomenon:

Rainbow, the drip of water, bird song, a bouquet of flowers: cycling through the senses, this passage presents the anatomy of a scene in an almost Whitmanian list of sensuous data. Such lists appear frequently in *Sea Change*, in poems whose lines are often laden to bursting with images, the fecundity of description motivated by their address to a future shorn of such graces. This address is evident in another passage from “Loan”:

Verbal profligacy—“teeming, too much”—is here explicitly a metaphor for material plenty; the very shape of the poems, their lines overflowing with prolixity, bears sometimes desperate witness of current plenty to a future wherein necessities—“open speech” as much as water—will be in short supply. Graham’s allegorical approach to form is enacted in the passage above, where even the shorter lines swell out from their central
axis as they describe present abundance, shrinking into themselves again as they imagine how less privileged readers will “try to / feel it.”

For all of her investment in sight and the other physical senses, it is feeling—not just sensation—that Graham sees as crucial to description, “seeing, which wants to feel more than it sees.” (“You see how this world goes,” says Lear to the blinded Gloucester; “I see it feelingly,” he replies.) In “Futures,” instead of addressing a future world, Graham speaks from it. In a passage that recalls Yeats’s “Wilde Swans at Coole,” as James Longenbach has already noted, Graham invests the act of seeing with a full weight of emotion:

one day a swan appeared out of nowhere on the drying river,  

it  

was sick, but it floated, and the eye felt the pain of rising to take it in—I own you  

said the old feeling, I want  
to begin counting  
again, I will count what is mine …

This emotion is not merely affirming or uplifting; throughout her work, Graham has always been suspicious of the eye’s avarice, what rises in us to claim whatever we find beautiful. Yet it is not just avarice the self feels when confronted with beauty, and a representation of sense experience that tries to side-step the moral ambiguities of looking (“that will not see / Because he doth not feel,” as Gloucester says on the heath, indicting himself among others) also relinquishes, these poems suggest, its access to what Graham calls “the eye-thinking heart.”

II

Of course it is to another Shakespeare play that Graham alludes most pointedly in this new collection. In the second scene of the first act of The Tempest, Ferdinand recounts how, while he was grieving for the father he believes to be drowned, the sound of music compelled him to the spot where he will see Miranda for the first time. Before that revelation Ariel sings again:

Full fathom five thy father lies,  
Of his bones are coral made;  
Those are pearls that were his eyes,  
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

The “sea change” Graham means is only in part the literal change she
discusses in the title poem and elsewhere in the collection: the warming
of the oceans and their encroachment. In Ariel’s song the King’s body
seems to have dissolved into its environment, his bone changed to coral,
his eyes to pearls, and throughout *Sea Change* there is a similar blurring
of outer and inner being. “Underworld” opens with the phrase “After
great rain,” and Graham’s misquotation of Dickinson points to how the
collection aligns extreme ecological states with extreme psychic states.

Graham’s use of the title goes further still. While Ariel’s music
comforts Ferdinand, “Allaying both [the water’s] fury and [his] passion
/ With its sweet air,” the song cannot but seem to him elegiac, a
funeral dirge: “The ditty does remember my drowned father.” And yet,
Ferdinand’s father has survived (like Ferdinand) the shipwreck, and
Ariel’s song is not an elegy but a promise: “Nothing of him that doth
fade / But doth suffer a sea-change.” The change Ariel sings is made
possible only by the machinations of Prospero, the omniscient mover
at the center of Shakespeare’s romance who allows tragedy to turn
comic. By seizing upon the phrase that guarantees that turn, exploiting
resonances unimaginable to Shakespeare but inescapable for us, Graham
underscores the absence from our world of any figure comparable to
the central manager of Shakespeare’s island. There is no magician to
provide for final redemption of our sea change.

This absence haunts the book. No contemporary American poet
is more restless or persistent an explorer of the devotional mode
than Graham, and these poems repeatedly attempt the invocation of
a transcendent principle they figure along generally Judeo-Christian
lines. After the appearance of the swan in “Futures,” the speaker of that
poem waxes penitent: “do not be angry with me o my god, I have begun
the action of beauty again.” Only in guilt, it seems, can she invoke an
audience for prayer without immediately affirming its non-existence. A
more customary gesture is on display in the book’s next poem, “Later in
Life”: “& these words are mine, there is no angel to / wrestle, there is no
inter- / mediary, there is something I must / tell you, you do not need
existence, these words, praise be, they can for now be / said.” This is
Graham at her most despondent, taking (and offering) only the comfort of nihilism: “you do not need existence.”

The speaker of “Belief System” calls into question not only the possibility of positive transcendence (“And always the / absent thing, there, up ahead, like a highway ripped open and left hanging in the / void,” “the absent thing” here both God and any human future), but also the more modest scriptural claim of effective human goodness. The poem ends with a terrible revision of the story of the adulteress in the eighth chapter of John:

… still those few pillars and the written voice—here it comes now the jesus, the body full of its organs, the parts of the stoning, each part—bone, sinew—each stone—till she’s gone, she’s clothes on the ground with brothers and uncles around—& the space where the blood flows sliced open there—& the circle of god, the circle of justice—the red eye at the center, the crowd dispersing, & the halo of arms still hovering where each let fly its stone.

Graham has never before so finally denied the possibility of divinity. In “The Taken-Down God,” from *Never* (2003), the poet sits outside a church on Easter Sunday, still enough a believer to respect that “You are not supposed to write in the presence,” and for all that poem’s lack of sure faith its final gesture is the mounting of a crucifix. Here the disenchantment goes far indeed, not only insisting on the humanity of Christ (“the body full of its organs”) but reducing his human name to a common noun (“the jesus”). Like Wilfred Owen in “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young,” where despite the angelic injunction Abraham “slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one,” Graham here deflates a story of divine intervention in human violence, reducing both the transcendent (“god”) and the exaltedly real (“justice”) to a “red eye” of blood.
In his excellent recent study *How Poets See the World: The Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry* (2005), Willard Spiegelman argues, “The natural world and our view of it come to stand, in an increasingly secularized world, for objects of religious contemplation.” This is not, of course, a new thought, but a variation on Malebranche’s famous dictum, “Attention is the natural prayer of the soul,” reaffirmed in the last century by such negative theologians as Walter Benjamin and Paul Celan. For Graham in these poems, the radiant natural world, magnificent even at its most destructive, is the sole repository of numinous significance, of possible goodness—a goodness in which the human element only seldom, only imperfectly, participates. In Iris Murdoch’s novel *A Fairly Honourable Defeat*, there is a marvelous Shakespearean scene where two characters, Morgan and Peter, find themselves in a field that serves for them as a Prospero’s island or forest of Arden, where Morgan presents “Full fathom five” as unimpeachable evidence of the possibility of human goodness. (The misanthropic Peter is forced to agree.) But Morgan is brought to this perception of goodness only through natural beauty:

> How extraordinary flowers are, she thought. Out of these dry cardboardy rods these complex fragile heads come out, skin-thin and moist, like nothing else in the world. People from a planet without flowers would think we must be mad with joy the whole time to have such things about us.

And yet, among the most robust human capacities is acclimation, and any thinker who would claim beauty—natural or man-made—as a provocation to moral improvement, to take care of the planet as of each other, must take into account our proclivity for looking away. “& before you know it,” writes Graham in “Day Off,” “we are ready to begin thinking about something else.”

One comes to feel that the peculiarities of Graham’s style in *Sea Change* are motivated in large part by a desperate attempt to keep us from shifting our gaze. In a dismissive, largely unserious review of the book in *The New Criterion*, William Logan critiques Graham’s recent poems for their sameness of tone, and it is true that almost all of the lines in this new collection are spoken in one of two registers: urgent or extremely urgent. Except for a few oases of intimacy and calm, the manner of these poems is frantic, sometimes monotonously so.
Graham’s style has increasingly, in the past decade, seemed to consist of an abdication of normative syntax. With very few exceptions, her sentences now consist of either short, end-stopped fragments or long, ecstatic rhapsodies that eschew subordination for the paratactic linkage of phrases and independent clauses with dashes and ampersands. Very often, the architecture of a poem as a whole is determined by the gradual shift from the first of these techniques to the second, a crescendo and accelerando (sometimes cut off at climax, sometimes allowed to ebb) that become predictable. While Graham has said in an interview that the book is “a piece driven by music,” the syntactical flattening-out of her recent work can obscure the gifts of what continues to be one of the more talented ears in contemporary American poetry.

More profoundly, this flattened syntax leads to a similar moral flatness, to what seems an unwillingness to distinguish meaningfully (which is the function of subordination) between radically different experiences. Clearly much of this equivocation is intentional and arises partly from the book’s shuttling back and forth between future and present. Thus, in “Futures,” a terrible vision of future desperation is braided with a little drama of parental tenderness:

… & the idea of
friends, what was that, & the day, in winter, your lower back
started acting up again, & they pluck out the eyes at the end for
food, & don’t forget
the meeting at 6, your child’s teacher
wishes to speak to you
about his future, & if there is no food and the rain is everywhere
switching-on as expected,
& you try to think of music and the blue of Giotto,
& if they have to eat the arms he will feel no pain at least …

The juxtaposition is not simply between comfort and deprivation, peace and violence, but also extremity (cannibalism, of course, but also the teacher calling a conference to discuss not a student’s performance or conduct but his “future”) and banality (“your lower back / started acting up again”), terror (“they pluck out the eyes”) and sublimity (“the blue of Giotto”). Everything feels exaggerated, so that the juxtapositions result not so much in horror as in a sort of blurred daze—and the
orchestration of affect, the making of the point, feels bare to the point of
cynicism. One feels oneself not only manipulated but condescended to.

More often, though, the moral flattening-out here, the reluctance
to keep separate very discrete kinds of moral action and experience,
seems to rise from the book’s underlying despair. Other readers have
spoken of the sense of hope they find in the collection, and evidence
for such readings can be found. In “The Violinist at the Window, 1918,”
the speaker imagines herself the figure in the Matisse painting of the
same title:

but I pick it up again, the
violin, it is
still here
in my left hand, it has been tied to me all this long time—I shall hold it, my
one burden, I shall hear the difference between up
and
down, & up we shall bring the bow now up &
down, & find
the note, sustained, fixed, this is what hope forced upon oneself by one’s
self sounds
like—this high note trembling—

It’s a beautiful image—the tremulous held tone figuring reluctant
hope—but an uncharacteristic one; very often in this collection,
it seems to me, Graham denies “the difference between up / and /
down.” Far more common is what the vision of the violinist is meant
to exorcise, the image of “the furrows of earth / full of men and their
parts, & blood as it sinks into / loam, into the page of statistics.” This
image appears repeatedly in these pages, like a tormenting dream:
“the millennia of carefully prepared and buried / bodies”; “earth full
of bodies everywhere.” In the last lines of “Just Before,” all of human
history is reduced to blood—the same blood that marks the floor at the
end of “Belief System”:  

… & all the blood that has been
wasted—all of it—gathers into deep coherent veins in the
earth
and calls itself
history—& we make it make
sense—
& we are asked to call it good.

Even more striking is this passage from “Nearing Dawn,” in which Graham reinterprets the Homeric legacy, the sacrifice of Iphigenia and the sack of Troy:

… & our ships will still go,
    after the ritual killing to make the wind listen,
out to sea as if they were going to a new place,
    forgetting they must come home yet again ashamed
no matter where they have been.

The suggestion of the shamefulness of all human endeavor (“yet again ashamed / no matter where they have been”), however compelling the evidence Sea Change rallies to support it, seems finally less a bracingly clear-eyed judgment than the abdication of moral discernment. In the sweep of parataxis (“Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and,’” as Elizabeth Bishop writes), something crucial to the meaningful representation of human life is lost. “The milk of / human kindness—poisoned from the start,” Graham writes in “Full Fathom,” doing Lady Macbeth one better.

This sense of ineluctable guilt has an ancient pedigree, of course, and it is the strain of Graham’s poetry that links her most closely to the Christian devotional tradition. “You are making yourself punishable says the flood,” Graham writes in “Underworld”; in “Day Off” she writes of “the sensation of punishment though still far away.” It is a punishment these poems seem often to welcome. In “Guantánamo,” human rights offenses meld with ecological offenses (which are also, of course, human rights offenses), and the speaker underscores her guilt with the repetition of a possessive pronoun: “Your / keep, your eyes your trigger / finger your spine your reasoning.” In “Full Fathom” a more nebulous political offense is confessed (“let go the / upstairs neighbor you did not / protect—they took him / away—”). But throughout Sea Change the source of guilt is most often not these sorts of evident implications in injustice, but rather an unease about pursuits commonly classed among our most exalted. In the book’s first poem Graham suggests the uselessness of art as a political response:
... so that I, speaking in this wind today, out loud in it, to no one, am
suddenly

aware

of having written my poems, I feel it in

my useless

hands

More significantly, the response to beauty itself seems implicated in guilt or in at least potential violence. In a passage from “Futures” already quoted, Graham cries out, “Do not be angry with me o my god, I have begun the action of beauty again”; in “No Long Way Round” she revisits the Orpheus myth:

... You have your imagination, says the evening. It is all you have

left, but its neck is open, the throat is
cut, you have not forgotten how to sing, or to want
to sing. It is

strange but you still

need to tell

your story—

Is this an image of heroic survival, the impulse to sing undestroyed by suffering? Or is it rather—as in the story of Orpheus’s severed head enchanting Sappho’s isle, or of transformed Philomela—an acknowledgment of what seems to be the irremediable intrication of violence and artistic making?

IV

“There is no document of civilization,” Walter Benjamin writes famously in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.” This assertion is difficult to dispute—where is the nation that has never waged war?—and it is hard to think of many statements that have been more influential on contemporary thought. But it seems to me that much of that thought has focused exclusively on barbarism, presenting a theory of the human that fails to account for civilization in its more exalted manifestations. “You have / no rightful way / to live—” Graham accuses herself in the last lines of “Nearing Dawn,” leaving one to wonder where, in this vision of the vanishing world, a place is laid out for human goodness. When such a thing is glimpsed in these poems, it is generally presented
in a way similar to that of “Futures,” a juxtaposition of the luminous (or the merely decent) and the unthinkable. So, in “Full Fathom,” after the narrative of the abducted narrator (“the / upstairs neighbor you did not / protect”), the poem returns to the rudiments of bountiful domesticity, a “loaf of / barley, millet and wheat” brought fresh-baked to the table. It is difficult to gauge, in such a poem, the quality of irony intended. Does the image of the bread redeem the earlier image, or is it merely a foil for the horror that fills most of the poem? I acknowledge that the question is naïve, and that Graham’s purpose is most likely to frustrate it. But this seems an irresponsible equivocation in a collection so fiercely committed to moral thought and so fiercely concerned with our own survival. Absent a philosophy (and a syntax) capable of subordinating, at least theoretically, human iniquity to human goodness, what rational basis can there be for any response to our imagined destruction save welcome?

Only one poem in Sea Change offers a sustained vision of human goodness, and, as in the case of Iris Murdoch’s Morgan Browne, faith in such goodness must be primed by natural beauty. “Summer Solstice” is among the collection’s simplest and most focused poems, and also among its best. Set in the same landscape as “Sea Change,” but in a moment—the solstice—not of unnatural weather but of natural grace, the poem is the book’s most sustained celebration of domestic life. The extra moments of light (compared, in one of the book’s characteristic strokes of synaesthesia, to “hearing steps come running towards me”) give birth to a confidence in the value of human institutions—here marriage—unlike anything else in the book, and to a vision of precisely the transcendence nearly everywhere else gestured to but unattained:

…the head has been put back on the body, it stands before us
    entire—it has been proven—all the pieces have
been found—the broken thing for an instant entire—oh strange
    addition and sum, here is no other further step
to be taken, we have arrived, all the rest now a falling
    back—but not yet not now now is all now and
here—the end of the day will not end—will stay with us
    this fraction longer—

The alignment of natural and psychic life allows for a provisional but nonetheless real resurrection: the reassemblage of Osiris or some
other risen god in a delirium of presence. The ending of the poem, which returns us to the “best / young tree” from the book’s opening, is beautiful enough to justify quoting it at length. The speaker and her beloved, though separated (she is inside the house, he outside), experience a moment of the truest communion this book can sanction, shared looking:

… & how I feel your heart beat slowly out there in the garden
   as we both see the
dove
in the
youngest acacia,
& how it is making its nest again this year, how it chose the second ranking
offshoot
again, how the young tree strains at the stake in the wind, & within,
   the still head of the mother sitting as if all time
came down to
this, the ringed neck, the
mate’s call from the
roof, & how we both know not to move—me inside at the window, deep
summer, dusk,
you in the line of sight of the
bird, & also
of the hawk changing sides of the field as
usual,
& the swallows riding the lowest currents, reddish, seeking their feed.

It is not that the world has entirely withdrawn its violence. The wind still blows hard enough that “the young tree strains at the stake,” but the dove provides an image of life lived despite such violence, inhabiting the present, as we have no choice but to do, “as if all time / came down to / this.” And the poem ends, beautifully, with an evocation of Keats’s “To Autumn” (“And gathering swallows twitter in the skies”), an evocation that alters its source—the swallows are hunting, a hawk hovers nearby—without entirely embittering it.

V

In a recent article on the American political poem, Peter Campion wonders about the relevance of his subject: “Can a poem do more than show us our entanglement,” he asks. Can it do anything more
than show us, in a more complicated way than is usually allowed by our public speech, our complicity in the conditions we deplore; can it make anything happen? “Poetry makes nothing happen,” writes Auden famously in his elegy for Yeats, a line that may be the most quoted of twentieth century verse, but the quotation always stops too short. “It survives,” he continues, and it seems to me that the etymology of the verb may receive insufficient attention. Poetry allows for something more than, something above (super), mere living (vivere); it offers the kind of life that can answer to the poem’s final exhortations:

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night,
With your unconstraining Voice
Still persuade us to rejoice;

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the deserts of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

I quote these famous lines because this poem, so often quoted to discredit poets’ political ambitions, in fact presents the most robust defense of the public role of poetry I know. Here Auden claims for poetry powers of radical transformation, for revolutions of experience: turning curses to vineyards and distress to rapture, bringing water to the desert. But these claims are dependent upon the performance of a moral task. “Follow right / To the bottom of the night,” he exhorts, the object of the imperative marvelous in ambiguity. Is right an intensifier here (meaning something like “directly” or “all the way to”) or a substantive?

Much effort has been spent, these past months of presidential politicking, in discussing the role of the imagination in public life—the role of rhetoric, of emotion, of something that has been called, most often dismissively,“inspiration.” Such dismissals (dismissal is not critique) have failed to acknowledge, I think, the extent to which nations are “imagined communities,” to use Benedict Anderson’s phrase, the extent
to which human society is as much a made thing as a poem. Graham stakes the relevance of her poems on the notion that the kind of information communicable in poetry is as difficult to find elsewhere as it is crucial to the shared imaginative project of our communal lives. In a recent interview published on the website of the Academy of American Poets, Graham speaks of the difference between “understanding” and “feeling” (“I see it feelingly”), of the need to “physically believe” our approaching but still mitigable devastation. Psychic transformation, she suggests, is the work of poetry, and it is a work with more than private effects: “With the farming of a verse, / Make a vineyard of the curse.” One is grateful to these always fascinating, frustrating, often beautiful poems for joining to aesthetic seriousness a complexity and grandeur of moral ambition too long nearly lost to our poetry.