

TO A GREEN THOUGHT

Garth Greenwell on Poetry

BEAUTY'S CANKER: ON JORIE GRAHAM

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

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 e-
 vaporation, & 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
tree, which you have come outside to stake again, & the loose stones in the
sill.

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:

... & the

wet rainbowing where oil from exhaust picks up light, sheds glow, then
 echoes in the drains where
 deep inside the
 drops fall individually, plink,
 & the places where birds

interject, & the coming-on of heat, & the girl looking sideways carrying
 the large

bouquet of blue hydrangeas, shaking the water off

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”:

... do you remember it, the faucet flared like a glare of
 open speech, a cry, you could say what you
 pleased, you could turn it

off, then on again—at will—and how it fell, teeming, too much, all over
 your

hands, much as you please—from where you are now
 try to
 feel it—

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

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.

III

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 cardboard 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—

... 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

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.