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# Lightning in a bottle

Poetic utterance as belated prophecy

By Rachel Hadas



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Wall painting in Tel Aviv, Israel | © john norman/Alamy

## IN THIS REVIEW

### RUNAWAY

96pp. Carcanet. Paperback, £12.99.

Jorie Graham

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*unaway* is an apt title for Jorie Graham's most recent collection of poems, her fifteenth. Wilfully, the poems

**R**ecareen along, overflowing the conventional boundaries of lyric. They are challenging both to read and to write about. Attempting to comment briefly on this visionary commotion is like trying to capture thunder and lightning in a bottle.

In every way this collection is capacious. Most of the poems consist of long breathless lines, often enjambed according to principles which are both metrically and semantically elusive. There seems no compelling reason why many lines should end where they do, or end at all. The entire collection feels like one long poem, in fact: the interludes between the poems can seem as arbitrary as the line breaks. Sentences in general are long, piling clause on clause: “My Skin Is”, an extreme example, is one thirty-seven-line sentence. Occasionally, though, and sometimes jarringly, the opposite is true. “Sam’s Standing” ends: “There is this place from which we watch. / There is no way to get here. ... // ... Here. Don’t take your eyes off // him. He’ll sit the winter through for you. He’s yours. he can’t fly off”.

Graham’s headlong pace often eludes affective response, so that the reader struggles to recuperate meaning in the poem’s wake, exhausted and disoriented: where and when are we? “This must have been way BC. Or is it 1944. Surely in 2044 we shall be / standing in the field again ...” (“I’m Reading Your Mind”). “Is it five minutes or 500 years” (“Thaw”). The reader may be tempted, sometimes, to simply give up; or else she may skim along the surface, propelled by the poems’ speed. This isn’t work that lends itself to being savoured. And yet prosaic these poems are not.

Strenuous, mannered, sometimes beautiful, *Runaway* is at all times apocalyptic and alarming. Any consolation to be found here has the radiance of a relic: “Plain sadness, this hand-knit / sweater, old things maybe u shall have some of” (“Sam’s Dream”). Everything human is under threat or worse, and so is the Earth. We’re granted glimpses of an arid Mediterranean landscape, with goats and trees and memories of (a key word for Graham) beauty. But alongside the natural vistas are pixels, monitors, VR, 3D glasses and autocorrect. Siri makes an appearance in the title of one poem. This is a decidedly twenty-first-century apocalypse.

Even occasional breaks in the harshness are disheartening. “Sam’s Dream”, a poem to an unborn grandchild, engages with things on a more human scale, with its tender voice and rapt attention: “This could have been a paradise my song begins. No, / this is, was, is, never will be again, will be, we hope // desperately wasn’t a dream”. But the poem goes on too long and loses its intensity. The pared-down poems with which *Runaway* concludes, as if the book is winding down in a halting decrescendo, command attention partly because of their sparseness. The title poem, for example, begins: “You wanted to / have vision / but the gods // changed”.

Graham is most effortlessly herself in her expansively vatic and apocalyptic mode. The range of her references is part of her power. In this bleak post-human landscape, it is startling but reassuring to find epigraphs by Tennyson and Donne, a poem “after” Edward Thomas, and numerous echoes of Hopkins (“the

sun lies oily in the sillion, furrow- // slice, mold”). The scale and authority of the long lines sometimes recall Whitman, but we are also in a realm we recognize from Beckett. This is a world beyond humanity, beyond nature, beyond culture, and yet amid the ruins there is the undeniable triumph and power (albeit a useless power) of poetic utterance. Perhaps *Runaway* could use some pruning. But one doesn’t edit prophets, and this collection feels like a belated prophecy – not so much a prediction of a burnt-out, excoriated, digitized world to come as an evocation of that world – a world already in existence.

*Rachel Hadas’s new collection of poems, Love and Dread, will be published in 2021*

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