

BOOK REVIEW | POETRY

# Jorie Graham's Poetic Autopsy for Self and Nation

By ADAM FITZGERALD AUG. 2, 2017

## FAST

By Jorie Graham

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On election night, as millions of anxious Americans watched the results come in, I sat in a hospital room in New Jersey, not far from where I grew up. My mother, who had been battling cancer for more than a year, lay next to me, unconscious, her hand in mine. It was her last night. The next day, everything I knew about the world felt gone. And it was. Without fully realizing it, I've been looking ever since for some way to make sense of this private and public mourning. Jorie Graham's new collection of poems, "Fast," does just that.

In this first volume since her career-spanning selected poems ("From the New World," published in 2015), Graham writes an autopsy of self and nation in the face of overwhelming loss. These are poems created while parents are dying and the poet herself is undergoing cancer treatment against the backdrop of ecological crisis and several American wars. What, if anything, links such extremes—between parents and planet, cancer and capitalism, cellphones and "the war on terror"? Improbable as it

sounds, Graham believes that although poetry itself might not reveal the answers, it expresses the continuities of experience that at least let us frame the questions.

If the title “Fast” seems more appropriate to an iPhone than a literary text, the opening poem, “Ashes,” quickly establishes a more sober tone. “Manacled to a whirl. Asked the plants to give me my small identity,” the first line reads. “No, the planets.” This elision of the micro (“plants”) into the macro (“planets”) is a trick straight out of the metaphysical poets’ playbook; think of John Donne’s metaphor of a compass for departing lovers. Yet Graham is more interested in how her “small identity”—her own life and traumas—can reveal how interconnected we all are. Picturing the hastening approach of catastrophic climate change, where “we would become glacial melt,” she imagines the apocalypse also unthawing “a prehistoric frozen mother’s / caress— or a finger / about to touch.” Time and space fold together in this elegy for plants, parents and planet. If that sounds horribly claustrophobic, Graham implies, such is life.

One of the volume’s greatest poems, “Deep Water Trawling,” demonstrates what Graham’s late style can accomplish as she finds herself ambushed by mortality yet eager to investigate a world beyond the self. Packed into a dense knot of prose-formatted lines, the poem tangles seemingly unrelated, fragmented thoughts. She’s like the Samuel Beckett of “Molloy,” as deep-sea diver:

*am I human we don't know that—just because I have this way of transmitting  
—call it voice—a threat—communal actually—the pelagic midwater nets like  
walls closing round us—starting in the far distance where they just look to us  
like distance—distance coming closer—hear it —eliminating background—is  
all foreground—you in it—the only ground— not even punishment—trawling-  
nets bycatch poison ghostfishing—the coil of the listening along the very  
bottom—the nets weighed down with ballast—raking the bottom looking for  
nothing—indiscriminate—there is nothing in particular you want—you just  
want—*

Graham isn’t speaking here as one “voice” but as a whole chorus: fishermen (“Ask us anything. How deep is the sea”), fish (“Did you ever kill a fish. I was once but now I am / human”), even machines. The breathless long-line shapes that move

throughout “Fast,” interrupted by dashes or keyboard-symbol arrows, seem at first more like nets than walls. These poems do swallow everything. But even when her pages risk overcrowding (and what are readers and governments today if not deepwater trawlers of the internet age, collecting without really digesting endless data), Graham counterbalances the pace, often with one- or two-word sentences. They’re like many essential air bubbles, allowing us to pause and fully appreciate these virtuoso surfaces.

In “From Inside the MRI” this technique turns terrifying. Inserting a contrast drip in her vein to search out cancer, the technician speaks to the poet: “Can you hear me, he says, squeeze this if problems arise he says, ok? ready?” What follows is the book’s most ecstatic rupture of language. Our primal tool to communicate is stripped of human affect:

*if if if if*  
*if yes if yes—here’s this to worship—hi hi hi hi—hi hi high high—*  
*high high not not not not highnot highnot not not—are you*  
*ok—next lasts*  
*three minutes—ready? yes?—not not not not be be be be notnot bebe notnot*  
*bebe*

These loopy stutters, though alarming, could still sound playful. But as the machine reads her body, Graham’s mind turns to “the graven images the mosques the waterworks the UN School—the idea of / shelter.” What prompts this imagined scene of military occupation in the middle of a medical test? Then the words “children” and “lockdown” lead to “their being in solitary no food no light no mattress no / latrine months / go by only who knows what / days are, the mind / dream is taken from them.” The poem goes on to lament “the children on Sinjar made to flee during this dying,” taking us to an Iraqi province brutalized by American airstrikes and ISIS alike. In Graham’s temporary confinement in an M.R.I., where words and bodies are reimagined, the afterlife of so much televised death hijacks consciousness.

“Fast” isn’t Graham’s first collection to interweave personal and collective history. Her 2005 volume “Overlord” is a sort of “Spoon River Anthology” for D-Day,

in which the voices of dead soldiers and nearby artists dramatize the invasion of Normandy (where Graham lived for a time). Yet here she engages with history less as a poetic influence than as the embodiment of global reality.

The moment I keep returning to comes toward the end of the collection, in a poem called “Prying,” where words detonate, one after the other:

*your life depends on what* says the disappearing air, the dis-  
 appearing vein, surveil me here, in solitary, entertain me *mise-en-scène*,  
 hear me chain of command, touch me, stain-free middle class American  
 female subject starting downtown on the drip line,  
 on the gleaming staff of this protean sentinel, its silver rod  
 held up, torchful of forgetfulness, streaming, translucent, give me your  
 mass, your teeming cell-dividing  
 mass—give me your poverty,  
 your every breath is screened, your every cell

We find the speaker once more in the middle of her treatment, this time with drugs in her veins. By this point, words like “solitary,” “cell” and “mass” can’t help summoning their latent political connotations. As the lines descend into a frightening echo of Emma Lazarus’s poem on the Statue of Liberty (“Give me your tired, your poor, / Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free”), the feel-good myth of American democracy explodes. This is not a nation built for immigrants seeking a new and better life. It’s a nation where “subjects” are policed up and down the “chain of command.” Where discovering a tumor “mass” might be the greatest fear for some (a “stain-free middle class American”) but is inseparable from “mass” incarceration suffered by others, the “mass” surveillance (where “your every breath is screened”) that affects us all.

Graham refuses to let herself or her readers be “torchful of forgetfulness,” reminding us in her shape-shifting poetry that cancer, racial and class warfare, immigrant phobia and nationalism infect us all in dissimilar yet interconnected ways. “Fast” is a great book about the nature of social life in the 21st century, a book in which past and future unfold in “every cell” across the vast space of a few words.

After the election and my mother's death, I adopted a paranoid logic that insisted these experiences, though seemingly random, were absolutely related. Jorie Graham has studied grief and tracked its symptoms to their sources. A body can indeed tell the story of the world.

ADAM FITZGERALD is the author of two poetry collections, "The Late Parade" and "George Washington."

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