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Jorie
Graham,
Poet

Presidential
Agendas

Image *and the* Arc of Feeling

Poet Jorie Graham gives form to the thrumming of “final questions.”

by Craig Lambert

*I*N 1983, A PREGNANT JORIE GRAHAM, a poet and teacher at the Iowa Writers Workshop, went to Emily Dickinson's house in Amherst, Massachusetts, with an urgent question. At 33, Graham was married to fellow poet James Galvin; after many miscarriages, she was, she recalls, “very excited and extremely grateful to be carrying a child in what seemed like a successful pregnancy.”

Yet Graham was also nervous. Of the women poets who had strongly influenced her work—Sappho, Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, Marianne Moore—“Not one of them had children. They were all maidens for one reason or another, by choice or by sexual preference. I was extremely worried about this issue of creativity, ambition, scope—whether being a parent might slake certain desires that could press one's poetry to be more ambitious, pronounced, urgent. I didn't know what the relationship was between

parenting and creativity. I was very serious about my work, and I also knew I was going to be a very hands-on mother. I went to Dickinson's house to sort of ask her for a clue."

Three women answered the door. "I thought, 'Oh my God, these are the Fates themselves in Dickinson's house.' They wouldn't let me in; I didn't know you were supposed to have an appointment. I was five months pregnant, and I wasn't from the East Coast. I really pleaded with them. At some point I burst into tears and said, 'Please, just let me see her room. That's all I want, to see the room.'

"They finally let me in, just to go up the stairs," Graham continues. "I knew where the room was. I'd seen it in photographs, and I looked immediately across to where her desk would be, where she had written all the poems. All I saw was a blank wall. My eyes sort of stroked down the wall and hit the floor, and there was a cradle, there, in place of her desk. A cryptic, typical Dickinsonian answer."

The three caretakers explained that the desk had departed the previous day, lent to Harvard's Houghton Library for an exhibit. The women had moved the cradle (which had once held Dickinson herself) up from the basement to occupy the space the desk had vacated. "The minute I saw the cradle, I knew I was going to name the child I was carrying Emily," Graham says. "As for my question, I still don't know the answer. The cradle wasn't an answer, it was a Zen koan—basically my question reformulated as an image. It was a riddle, just as most of Dickinson's work is ultimately a riddle."

Since then, some of the riddle's terms have been solved. Graham has published eight books of poems and won numerous awards, including a MacArthur Fellowship and a Pulitzer Prize. In 1998, she became the first woman to hold what may be the most prestigious academic chair in American letters, Harvard's Boylston professorship of rhetoric and oratory, established in 1771. (Her predecessor was Nobel laureate Seamus Heaney, Litt.D '98, now Ralph Waldo Emerson poet in residence, who held the chair from 1984 to 1997.) Emily Galvin is a 17-year-old Harvard freshman, and the desk of her namesake, Emily Dickinson, is back in Amherst.



JORIE GRAHAM can talk; asking her a question is like getting a drink from a fire hose. The poet is dazzlingly intense, articulate, erudite; her mind moves swiftly, with frequent digressions that suggest unseen reservoirs of knowledge. A short keening on John F. Kennedy Jr.'s plane crash leads to some reflections on the Irish style of funeral and then to thoughts on death and the interweaving of soul and body. "We are this braided thing," she ends up musing. "Yeats speaks of 'this dying animal' that we each carry around."

THE Iowa Writers Workshop is to American literature what Harvard Law School is to the U.S. Supreme Court: the launching pad for a

disproportionate number of those who "make it." Founded in 1936 at the University of Iowa, the Workshop is the most famous writing school in the world: the M.F.A. program in poetry admits only about 4 percent of its applicants and can override university admissions requirements in favor of a gifted applicant with a dicey transcript. "We pay very little attention to anything other than the poetry," Graham says. "We hardly read the rest of the application."

The Workshop is intense. About 50 poets and 50 fiction writers are enrolled at a time. They live for two years in "a small town with four strong seasons and two good bars," Graham says. The 100 students probably agree on only one thing: writing is paramount. This committed atmosphere—a "kind of monastic apprenticeship to their own inner life, solitude, fears, and talent," in Graham's words—has produced remarkable results: Flannery O'Connor, John Irving, Mark Strand, James Tate, Charles Wright, Rita Dove, Kurt Vonnegut, and Philip Roth, to cite a few famous graduates.

For most of the last quarter-century, the Workshop has been Graham's home base. She earned an M.F.A. there in 1978, for the first semester commuting weekly to Iowa City from Los Angeles, where she lived with her then-husband Bill Graham, son of *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham and her late husband, Philip L. Graham, LL.B. '39. A professor of English at Iowa from 1983 to 2000 (with stints as a visiting scholar at Harvard and elsewhere), Jorie Graham directed the poetry program for her last five years there.

She was a legendary teacher at Iowa, a place where poet John Berryman taught poet Don Justice, who taught Graham. She consciously identifies with that lineage. "There's a long history of poets teaching poets. There is no Keats without Keats reading Shakespeare and studying Shakespeare's technique. But teaching from beyond the grave, or in the classroom, really makes little difference. The essential questions are thrumming underneath every single moment of everyday life. Literature poses problems that I would call final questions: essential metaphysical, intellectual, emotional questions. Spiritual questions."

At Harvard, Dan Chiasson, a graduate student who has taken two of Graham's poetry workshops, says that she "bears down on our poems as though they were her own, treats them as real poetry. She thinks very, very hard about students' work, and students are moved by that, moved to give her something worth thinking about. Jorie is extremely available for one-on-one meetings, which can last two, three, or four hours. There's the feeling that in terms of your creative and imaginative life, she knows you better than you know yourself; Jorie can identify what the actual errand of your poem is—you may think it's about your family, but she shows you something elusive that may be even more important."

Graham brings an unusual degree of focus to her reading. "Reading is not something you learn well in most high schools in this country anymore," she says. "It's not about being able to read the surface and repeat the content. It involves being able to undergo the experience that the writer has undergone in the poem." For her, poetry and fiction use language in a special way—not to report or record experience, but to *create* experience in a manner that would be impossible without the medium of words. "In poetry, you have to feel deeply something inchoate, something which is coming up from a place that you don't even know the register of," she says. "So you learn techniques, you learn how to use language to *have* the experience of the poem instead of using it to *report* the experience; you learn how to be the protagonist of your poem instead of its narrator. It's a radical shift."

The *Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974-1994* won Graham the 1996 Pulitzer Prize in poetry. "I'm not an urban poet," she says. "There's something truly baffling about one's encounter with the natural world, about contacting something so radically indifferent to one's presence. I have to turn to ethics, philosophy, and politics to navigate in it. It's not quite the same as the perhaps more understandable human world." Graham's poems often juxtapose some natural element with an arresting or devastating human event: say, a crow perched above a killing field—which, to the crow, is only a field.

On Martha's Vineyard, where Graham escapes on weekends when possible, she spends hours walking along beaches, through cemeteries and woods, scraps of

paper in her pocket. "A pen is my walking stick, I can't take a walk without one," she says. On the beach, she might study the intertidal fringe: "I'm obsessed with life that lives half in water and half in sun, the evolutionary edge," she muses. "We ourselves are on an edge, due to the luck of mortality; one's spirit doesn't feel it is aging, but one's body does."

To write poetry, "I need to be in an apparently empty frame of mind, without the noise of thinking so hard," Graham says. "You are trying to hear the music of your own thinking in poetry, and if you have silence around you, it helps. I have never known where I'm going to start. Often there's a music, or sound, or an image that gnaws. It invites the senses to do a kind of work you don't quite have instructions for. Then questions attach themselves to a current that feels, perhaps, more ancient. A good poem is always a reaction, a moment of acute surprise that occurred in the soul of the speaker."

THE LITERARY CRITIC who has written most extensively on Graham is Porter University Professor Helen Vendler, Ph.D. '60. Her 1996 book *The Breaking of Style* treats Hopkins, Heaney, and Graham, and *Soul Says* (1995), on modern poets, bears the same title as the final poem in Graham's 1991 collection, *Region of Unlikeness*. The poet's sizable oeuvre includes very little prose but more than 500 published poems, "a remarkably original body of writing, because no book repeats any other book," says Vendler. Graham explains: "You want to go somewhere you haven't been before. To remain an artist, you have to keep erasing your path behind you."

Yet there are some recurrent themes. *Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts* (1980), Graham's first book, takes its title from Nietzsche's characterization of the human condition; it concerns "the match of the material and spectral sides of things," according to Vendler. Graham was a fellow at Radcliffe's Bunting Institute in 1982-83, a formative year for her work; *Erosion* (1983), which extended her reflections on matter and spirit, brought the poet wide recognition.

A later poem, "Band Practice" from *Materialism* (1993), illustrates Graham's magic at work. The speaker looks out from her home at bushes in the afternoon light. The light also glints off the instruments of a band practicing in a nearby field. The band is seen as a collective beast, but the bushes are not aware of the band; they can only feel light and wind. "It's about the self as a perceptual creature limited by its access pores—there is always something you are not equipped to take in," Vendler explains. "She's writing a poem about the self without saying 'I, me, my wife, my husband'—it's writing in a completely objective way."

"The weight of poetry in any given [Graham] book," Vendler adds, "is less confessional than Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, or Adrienne Rich, who mostly followed in the wake of [Robert] Lowell and were influenced by his confessional

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AFTERWARDS

I am beneath the tree. To the right the river is melting the young sun.
And translucence itself, bare, bony, feeding and growing on the manifest,
frets in the small puddles of snowmelt sidewalks and frozen lawns hold up
full of sky.

From this eternity, where we do not resemble ourselves, where
resemblance is finally
beside (as the river is) the point,

and attention can no longer change the outcome of the gaze,
the ear too is finally sated, starlings starting up laddering of chatter,
all at once all to the left,
invisible in the pruned-back

hawthorn, heard and heard again, and yet again
differently heard, but silting

the head with inwardness and making always a
dispersing but still

coalescing opening in the listener who
cannot look at them exactly,

since they are invisible inside the greens—though screeching-full in
syncopations of yellowest,
fine-thought, finespun

rivering of almost-knowables. "Gold" is too dark. "Featherwork"
too thick. When two

appear in flight, straight to the child-sized pond of
melted snow,

and thrash, dunk, rise, shake, rethrashing, reconfiguring through
reshufflings and resettlings the whole body of integrated
featherwork,

they shatter open the blue-and-tree-tip filled-up gaze of
the lawn's two pools,

breaking and ruffling all the crisp true sky we had seen living
down in that tasseled

earth. How shall we say this *happened*? Something inaudible
has ceased. Has gone back round to an other side
of which this side's access was [is] this bodywidth of
still sky

deep in just-greening soil? We left the party without a word.
We did not change, but time changed us. It should be,

it seems, one or the other of us who is supposed to say—lest
there be nothing—*here we are*. It was supposed to become familiar
(this earth). It was to become "ours". Lest there be nothing.

Lest we reach down to touch our own reflection here.

Shouldn't depth come to sight and let it in, in the end, as the form
the farewell takes: representation: dead men:

lean forward and look in: the raggedness of where the openings
are: precision of the limbs upthrusting down to hell:

the gleaming in: so blue: and that it *has* a bottom: even a few clouds
if you keep

attending: and something that's an *edge-of*: and mind-cracks: and how the
poem is

about that: that distant life: I carry it inside me but
can plant it into soil: so that it becomes impossible
to say that anything swayed

from *in* to *out*: then back to "is this mine, or yours?": the mind
seeks danger out: it reaches in, would touch: where the subject

is emptying,
war is:

morality play: preface: what there is to be thought: love:
begin with the world: let it be small enough.

~JORIE GRAHAM

style." Instead, Graham tackles big issues of philosophy, religion, history, and politics: *Region of Unlikeness*, for example, opens with 10 epigraphs, including four from Saint Augustine and three from German philosopher Martin Heidegger. In "Two Paintings by Gustav Klimt," from *Erosion*, Graham explores the Holocaust, considering how the innocence of the word *Buchenwald* is lost forever. "History," from the same collection, describes a tree with a Nazi grenade embedded in it; when the tree is later cut down and burned as firewood, the grenade explodes. "I come from people who held slaves, and people who were put in ovens," Graham says. "So I have a sense there is very little one human being won't do to another."

Such vast themes do not fit easily into the short formats of lyric poetry. "It's hard to fit your epic perceptions into a lyric moment," says Vendler, whose formidable critical intelligence cannot always solve the conundrums of Graham's work. "I say I understand Jorie's books retrospectively—after the next one comes out," she says. Even readers who are dazzled by the power of Graham's imagery often find it difficult to follow the startling, nonlinear leaps of her thought. "Most poetry in any era has been difficult for those who read it," Graham explains. "There's not much poetry written that doesn't have lots of darkness and blindness in it. Pope is difficult. Whitman is difficult, though there's an accessible surface. Poetry is a way of saying something that can't quite be said—yet you have to use words. So much of life is like a phantom limb; the whole thing is a haunted existence. To write poetry is to inhabit those zones."

IN HARVARD YARD, on a summer evening, Graham reads the poems of Emily Dickinson—whom she calls "one sexy poet"—to an audience on the steps of Widener Library. Graham is a gifted reader-performer of poetry; when she reads her own work aloud, it becomes far more accessible: the puzzling non sequiturs suddenly make sense, the arc of feeling beneath the words awakens in the listener's body. Many critics have called Graham a cerebral, philosophical poet, but perhaps the exact opposite is the case: her nonlinearity and leaping juxtapositions, like koans, may be devices intended to deflect the intellect. Graham likes to quote Wallace Stevens to the effect that "a poem must resist the intelligence *almost* successfully." To read a Jorie Graham poem requires opening some channel other than intelligence and logic:

at times she speaks directly to the senses, using words to evoke bodily sensations, like those of walking, or breathing.

BORN A TAURUS on May 9, 1950, Graham describes her zodiacal traits: "Stubborn, sensuous, grounded, thrown by transitions." The last couple of years have offered little *but* transitions: uprooting from Iowa City to Cambridge and Martha's Vineyard; undergoing the painful dissolution of her long marriage to James Galvin; turning 50; starting a new job at Harvard; losing the family home in Iowa to a flood; dropping 25 pounds; seeing her only child leave home and begin college.

The poet's youth was almost impossibly glamorous and romantic. Though born in New York City, she spent her first 17 years in Italy, the daughter of an Irish Catholic father from Virginia and a Jewish mother from Brooklyn. Graham grew up in the old Trastevere section of Rome, thick with churches. Her father, Curtis Bill Pepper, a war correspondent, headed *Newsweek's* Rome bureau: its office was on the top floor of their house. The home was a whirlwind of international cables, visits by newsmakers, and dinners with personalities from the Rome of *la dolce vita*. Graham's mother, sculptor Beverly Pepper, was in her studio daily at 6 A.M., welding with an arc lamp. After a busy day cooking, drawing, tending to the household and family, she would be back in the studio after the others had gone to bed.

"I was taught three/names for the tree facing my window/*Castagno...chassagne...chestnut*" begins an early poem. Schooled at a French lycée in Rome, Graham grew up trilingual, and often dreams in Italian. "Now and then my students hear me interject an Italian expression in the middle of a frustrated attempt to get something across," she says. (Her brother, John Pepper, a theater and film director and an Italian citizen, lives in France.) At 17 Graham decamped for the Sorbonne; a classmate of Daniel Cohn-Bendit, she was arrested twice during the heady days of May 1968 that almost toppled Charles de Gaulle.

The Italian director Michaelangelo Antonioni had hired the teenage Graham as a researcher for his film *Zabriskie Point*; cinema intrigued her, and in 1969 she enrolled in the film program at New York University. While there, she studied with director Martin Scorsese and marched in demonstrations with Students for a Democratic Society. One day, lost in a corridor, Graham heard some lines of T.S. Eliot floating out the open door of a classroom; she entered and listened to writer and critic M.L. Rosenthal read. It was a moment of epiphany. For the first time, she heard poetry in English, and it struck a resonant chord.

IN A PINE FOREST on Martha's Vineyard, on a summer day, the first birdcall wakes Graham, like an alarm clock, just before 5 A.M. She gets a cup of coffee, then climbs back into her king-size bed; it is a desk, complete with occasional ink stains on its sheets, covered in notebooks and unfinished drafts of poems. She will work through the dawn hours until her daughter wakes up. "The early morning is so tentative. It's like a miracle," she says. "The wind shifts at that hour. Birds begin solo singing, then there is dawn chorusing. 'Tutor birds' teach birdcalls to their young; it takes 12 to 14 days to learn the whole repertoire, and the tutor may repeat a call as often as 32 times per hour. As the light gets brighter, the bird songs lessen. The sun rises and there starts to be heat. You hear insects. Then smells start coming up. In the evening you have the

reverse process, as things are extinguishing, going out."

Seamus Heaney advised Graham to get a "cottage" away from Cambridge—otherwise, he said, she would never get any writing done. The poet has owned her Vineyard home for three years; before accepting the job at Harvard, she wanted to be sure she could write there—"Otherwise, I'd be of no use to Harvard," she says. The house is a capacious dwelling in the woods, sparsely furnished with beautiful things—large hanging quilts, antique tables—giving it the air of a gallery. Graham is comfortable in garden and kitchen. "I've spent so many years baking bread every day, making pasta," she says. "I grew up in a country where they make food from scratch. Even as a schoolgirl I was responsible for a certain amount of ironing and baking."

Graham has not lived near the ocean since her Mediterranean childhood, and the experience is opening fresh mysteries and questions: "The ocean pretty radically erases anything you might have thought you knew a priori," she asserts. Her beach and island walks inspired a burst of creation last summer. "I'm writing poems at a rate of speed so great I can hardly keep up with them," she said at the time. "I not only date the draft, but add the time of day. Out of nowhere, it seems, something like an angel suddenly speaks. I hope it never ends. It's so thrilling, there's no love affair in the world like it. Of course, it could all be garbage! But that doesn't affect the joy of being alive in one's language and feeling it flow. It's like getting water from the well—if it's not drinkable, we'll have to drink elsewhere. It's a miracle either way."

That first gush of water will go through many decantings and distillations. Graham writes her first drafts longhand in notebooks—sometimes writing so fast that she has trouble deciphering her words later—and transcribes these onto pads. Eventually the poems find their way onto a computer, although, she says, "I cannot see revising on a screen. I can't think without holding a pen."

There are many drafts, "so many drafts of a poem that people would be appalled," she says. "And the difference between an early and a late draft is extreme. Sometimes a poem isn't *born* until a late draft. I have ended up with every single draft of every poem I've written. Not for posterity, but because I always feared I could lose the poem at any point, and not realize I was losing it. I always put the first and last drafts side by side—I go to the notebook, where it just spewed out, and make sure the arc of emotion has not been prettified or had the wind knocked out of it by writerly technique, by 'good writing.'"

NOT FAR FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF IOWA there is an Amish community, and for a long time Graham has collected Amish quilts. In Cambridge, she is kneeling on the floor, scrutinizing a quilt that a friend has just acquired, and the poet is deeply absorbed. She studies the different kinds of material, and from the design, fabric, stitchwork, and thread, is able to estimate when the quilt was made. The different types of stitches reveal that three different women worked on it. "There's the sensation of the made thing," she explains. "It stands alone and it lives, without its maker. Like putting a child forth into the world. Life does win out over death in that way. Whether it's made of flesh or of words, it stands against death." □

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