



## BEGINNINGS

GRAHAM FOUST • *Terminations*

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Graham Foust's ninth collection, *Terminations*, includes a poem called 'Now and Then'. Here it is, in its entirety:

Doubled, it's nothing

but an edge that I can keep

on going over.

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Oh but back there in all that gold!

No more than a snapshot, the poem is poised between two states, tugged gently between them: the present, spilling over to the future (like a waterfall) and the nostalgic, grainy footage of the past, 'back there in all that gold', a late, long summer evening, barely out of reach. The first word of the poem, 'Doubled', seems to acknowledge that experience is given form by two timeframes at once, a 'now' and 'then' occurring simultaneously, the past still somehow present in the present, like holding up a Polaroid photograph to the scene it near-enough depicts. For twenty years, Foust's poetry has occupied this 'Doubled' moment, caught between the past and future in a 'now' that seems to hold them both, where time 'melts in, melts out' ('Memory') and 'the

next minute / overtakes the last' ('Old Hollywood Mirror') before it has a chance to settle.

As Ange Mlinko has suggested, the raw material of Foust's writing 'evokes [the] vast tracts of middle America', a world of daytime beers and backyard barbecues, suburban streets and sleepless nights, shopping malls, interstates, enormous, cinematic skies. The poems in *Terminations* turn up 'Dire sneakers, blue daylight' and 'weedy yard[s]' ('The Mower'), pausing to document the 'Sun through / a wound // in some plastic / wrap caught // on wire around / a field' ('Passenger Side'), the mundane magic of the overlooked. With taut control, Foust observes the subtle freakishness of our experience, discovering 'blips of sublimity' in the everyday – as he writes in *Time Down to Mind* (2015) – exposing a world where nothing could be stranger than a simple record of what happens. I'm reminded of a curious comment of Randall Jarrell's, describing Marianne Moore: 'She not only can, but must, make poetry out of everything and anything: she is like Midas, or like Mozart choosing unpromising themes for the fun of it, or like one of those princesses whom wizards force to manufacture sheets out of nettles.'

The transformation that takes place in Foust's poetry – where the 'everything and anything' of forgotten America takes on the shape and feel of something more profound – isn't so much 'for the fun of it', as Jarrell says of Mozart; while his poetry can be both fun and very funny, Foust instead seems anxious to discover meaning in the flood of what keeps slipping by, conscious that each moment is a termination of itself. Even the essentially minimalist framework of Foust's poetry – his *blink-and-you'll-miss-it* arrangement of compact lines and hedge-trimmed syllables – is enough to place us in the realm of leftovers and rescued fragments, like the 'used paper, / stacked mirrors, [and] thrown drapery' of the collection's title poem. 'You don't get the sentences you don't make / back,' suggests a line from 'Buddy Holly on Shuffle All Day', as if to make the case for urgency. 'Quick, before you die,' writes Rae Armantrout – another poet of skeletal lines to whom Foust has been compared – 'describe // the exact shade / of this hotel carpet.' Foust's is a poetry that knows what's there is never there for long. As he writes in *Necessary Stranger* (2007): 'I will always never / see this again.'

For poet and novelist Ben Lerner, Foust inhabits ‘a world from which meaning has [already] departed’, where ‘the poet seeks to restore it, however tentatively, through the powers of artifice.’ In an interview with Barbara Claire Freeman, Foust himself describes the search for meaning ‘in the face of [...] the meaningless, a pressure that seems to be increasing all the time, given that we live in such accelerated circumstances.’ Part speed, part apathy, part over-saturation, the world to which Foust’s poems respond would seem to be disinterested, unwilling to play ball. (‘A piece of green pepper / fell / off the wooden salad bowl,’ reads Richard Brautigan’s 1968 poem ‘Haiku Ambulance’: ‘so what?’) And yet, Foust mounts a challenge to meaninglessness, refusing to accept the premise. ‘Another borderline-meaningless morning save / for everything,’ suggests an early passage from *A Mouth in California* (2009). ‘Beginning where you look at it, the world,’ begins a poem in *Terminations*, a reminder that our world only exists insofar as we attend to it. ‘Sunday Morning’ – whose title winks at Wallace Stevens – offers an illustration of the strangeness going on beneath our noses, as Foust’s speaker, in a moment of online distractibility, discovers (to his amazement-cum-confusion) ‘that chimpanzees have a bone in their hearts’. “‘The world is everything that is the case,’” reminds a poem two pages later, lifting a line from Wittgenstein.

Foust’s great strength as a poet is his ability to restore strangeness – and so, by extension, wonder, meaning, even a sense of disbelief – to an environment turned stale. He is a master of the sleight of hand, spinning us endlessly through tiny, unexpected turns and reversals of fortune, his poetry alive with jump-cuts, rewinds, sudden jolts, and contradictions. ‘How long has this not been going on?’, asks an early poem in *Terminations* (‘First Mirror’); ‘Given eight / severed fingers,’ suggests another, ‘sort the left / hand’s fingers / from the right’s’ (‘Big To-Do’). The casual, plainspoken vernacular of Foust’s poems folds over itself, origami-like, creased into form; as Robert Lowell wrote of John Berryman, Foust sings in a ‘disrupted and mended syntax’, cracking language into something new. ‘I often wonder if my interest in this sort of thing has something to do with having lived with a handful of very serious ceramicists,’ says Foust, again to Freeman: ‘I really envied that deep involvement with materials and methods, and I guess I wanted

to have the same relationship to words and sentences that they did to dirt and fire.’

Foust’s manhandling of language – his ‘awkward hacks at English’, as he puts it in *Embarrassments* (2021) – has been observed before. ‘At times there seems an almost physical presence to [the poems],’ writes Robert Creeley (arguably Foust’s closest poetic relative), ‘a third dimension, which is substance.’ Whether lingering over the strangeness of received words and habitual phrases – ‘Phone “about to die”’ (‘The Vapor and the Dusk’); ‘Overhearer, I went *apeshit*’ (‘Dialectical Image’) – or bending and condensing language with his trademark blend of contractions, prefixes, line breaks, and abbreviations, Foust undermines our blindly held beliefs that language will (or *should*) behave as we expect. ‘Remember that the poem, while not used in the language-game of information, is composed in the language of information,’ suggests a line in *To Anacreon in Heaven and Other Poems* (2013), the poet’s fifth collection, a reminder that the words we share can serve a range of very different functions. ‘English,’ agrees a poem in *Time Down to Mind*, ‘official language of traffic / and other things that happen the world over’.

Foust’s poems shake us from the trance of autopilot, forcing us to reconsider what we take as *normal*, both in language and the world itself, leaving us ‘confused as to what / it was I was used to’ (‘The Mower’). After all, ‘What I am looking for,’ writes John Berryman, ‘may be / Happening in the gaps of what I know.’ Foust’s own broken and mended syntax slows language and what it conjures, like water swirling in an eddy, twisting words and sentences almost clumsily into shape, what the poet Adam Heardman has referred to as the ‘accidental dance’ of Foust’s poetics. ‘Reading his poems feels exactly like meeting them in a corridor,’ argues Heardman: ‘Whether by accident or design, you and the poem get in each other’s way. The game is to find a means to continue together.’ We find ourselves wrong-footed, constantly, by the poems, roped in to a kind of slapstick performance. ‘Foust creates a unique idiom of tragicomic pratfalls,’ reads text on the cover of *A Mouth in California*, ‘a ballet of falling down.’ Foust’s language is physical, ‘like a body part you almost feel’, as he writes in *Nightingalelessness* (2018). And yet, ‘The human body is a lot of maintenance,’ quips Jerry in an episode of *Seinfeld*: ‘It’s a lot of showering, a lot of shaving, a lot of

cleaning, a lot of clipping, a lot of checking. If your body was a car, you wouldn't buy it.' While Foust acknowledges these imperfections – both in the body and our use of language – he also seems to relish, even to celebrate the fact that, in the end, these are the only words, the only limbs, the only days and weeks we have. 'The imperfect is our paradise,' wrote Wallace Stevens, and 'in this bitterness, delight'. *If this is verging on nonsense*, Foust's poems seem to say, *well, so is life*.

At the same time, that what we have – however clunky or depleted of meaning – might be all that we get is a cause for concern. 'What Foust seems to beat against or is beaten with is [a] question,' writes Logan Esdale: 'What makes a person or relationship or an event or a [use of] language exceptional, singular, or distinctive?' As Foust puts it in 'With Hidden Noise': 'What's worth meaning?' The clock, for Foust, is always ticking, the 'now, which, *just* now, is almost *then*' ('Thriller') refusing to let up. 'Foust, now in early middle age, feels time's pressure as never before,' suggests Rae Armantrout. If every second is a termination, then we are in a constant state of closing down. This sense in the poems is apparent from the start. The cover shows an illustration by the artist Albert York, a naked man and woman meet-and-greeting with a skeleton, face-to-face with their mortality, the slipping time subtly signalled by a fingernail of waning moon. That the couple resemble Adam and Eve seems more than a coincidence. They bring to mind the moment of Expulsion, in which the banished couple are escorted from the premises of Eden by the Archangel Michael; the nude woman in York's watercolour, in particular, is reminiscent of the Eve in Masaccio's fresco (c. 1427) in the Brancacci Chapel, which shows the pair making their solitary way into the wilderness, in need of a new place to live.

What emerges from this pressure, somehow, is a subtle note of optimism, as though the fact that everything is ending makes what happens all the more worth noticing. 'To love's to love the beloved's specifics', writes Foust in 'Super Stupid', whether a partner, a neighbour, a city, an hour. More than this, the poet seems to cling to an idea that 'Every kind of world' is possible ('Watchlist'), that the future – however seemingly inevitable – has not yet been determined. After all, 'what's here suggests what *could* be here', asserts a poem 'After Gerard Manley Hopkins'. "The future / is all around us", ends Rae Armantrout's 'Around', 'It's



a place, // anyplace / where we don't exist', pointing either to a world in which the human 'we' has phased away, or possibly to one we just haven't arrived in yet. At the heart of *Terminations* – poem 36 of 71, the very centre – Foust places a single, four-line stanza, 'Time', sounding a quiet note of consolation, even repair:

At long last, the wound withdrawn,

your sweet face unbruised again,

like water reunited

on the near side of a rock.

'Durs Grünbein says that he "might even go so far as to say that poetry is in large part born from the desire to start over as often as possible"' writes Foust in a review of Grünbein's *The Vocation of Poetry* (2011). With his new poems, Foust embraces this desire, proving that starting over – finding the moment *after* termination – is always a possibility, that it is never, any time, too late.