



THE WHILE IN WHICH WE'RE  
NOT NOTHING

Jorie Graham, *Runaway* (Carcenet, 2020)

In the UK at least, handling a new collection of poetry by Jorie Graham involves a necessary encounter with the distinctive dimensions and tactility of her publications, set widely on expansive pages to accommodate her unravelling, omnivorous lines. Holding a copy of *Runaway*, Graham's fifteenth collection and the fourth in her recent run of books addressing the long onslaughts of climate change and ecological collapse, one feels a weight of expectation: Graham's is a poetry to hold and to be held by. Inside, the poems themselves are charged with expectation, too, imagining a set of futures mounting the horizon, casting anxious eyes over the soon-to-be and up-ahead. 'Spring has a look in its eye you should not trust / anymore,' suggests one poem, expecting a betrayal. 'Also *watch the clock*,' cautions another, because '*the clock is / running out*.' As the poems gather momentum, snowballing on, at times speeding away from us so quickly that their meanings slip, they spew out the detritus of a damaged and endangered world, leaving in their wake a heap of outmoded technology and disappearing species. 'The assembly

lines, the / jet trails, the idea of prayer, thievery, scaffolds, money, how quickly they all / vanished,' reads 'When Overfull of Pain I'. This is a collection that reminds us, on page after page, that "The new thing now is not going to be new by the time you read this."

Around two thirds of *Runaway* is measured out in quatrains, as though the rigid, stable form of the poems were trying to hold back the inevitable, our 'runaway everything', as Graham puts it in an interview from 2017, 'from climate change to robotization to overpopulation and collapse of resources'. Instead, the regularity of Graham's quatrains serves to highlight their own overflow, emphasising the enjambment-flooded accretion and acceleration of the poems, more like stanzas punched out by machines than the organic continuation of a centuries-old verse form. After all, writes Ben Lerner in *The Lichtenberg Figures* (2004), 'A cookie // is not the only substance that receives the shape / of the instrument with which it's cut.'

This verbal overspill gestures, of course, to the uncontrollable effects of climate change, often picturing a future which has already arrived, 'Not / history anymore [...] but / like it,' a landscape missing reefs and fish, wielding 'unlistable new seasons', from where we 'think of causes & / effects', suggests the voice of "Thaw", 'which is a form of regret'. More alarmingly still, Graham frequently presents a future in which humans seem to play no part, 'as if it is all going to begin again, though this time without you / standing here / noticing'. It is no surprise that the collection returns often to images of archaeology, as if the speakers of several poems were in the act of digging up their histories:

eyes closed I push  
down through the subflooring the foundation into grey soil not touched by light in  
centuries. I'll break it open now. I'll push into the roots that died when place was  
cleared of place. Dismembered roots, here was my zip, my street address. My name.

The ever-deepening lines of these poems certainly give the impression of geological layering, piling up above us as we mine down through each page. But the atmosphere of *Runaway* is also thick with ash and dust, "The dust / that will cover it all," in the words of "[To] the Last

[Be] Human', the ash 'where yr life was', according to the title poem. 'If you stay still, earth buries you, ready or not,' writes Annie Dillard in *For the Time Being* (2000), 'The debris on the tops of your feet or shoes thickens, windblown dirt piles around it, and pretty soon your feet are underground': 'Quick: why aren't you dusting?'

Alongside burial, Graham's collection cannot ignore the threat of rising waters, which inevitably seep their way into the poems—'more new hours days debt melt / faster rising than / ever anticipated'—reminding me of Richard Misrach's eerie, pastel photographs of the Salton Sea in California (c. 1983), part of his ongoing *Desert Cantos* series, begun in the late seventies. Graham articulates her interest in water—a concern that aligns her recent poetry with that of Alice Oswald—as an expression of the fact that 'we are heading towards a dystopian relationship with water above all else'. At the same time, however, Graham acknowledges that 'water is a miracle—it takes so many forms—is the core of life—is holy', and so 'it becomes important to pay utmost attention to the holiness which is this planet's life-blood'. This holiness flows beautifully through 'All', the collection's opening poem, a portrait of 'the rained-on' world, worshipping 'the as-if inquisitive garden, the as-if-perfect beginning again / of the buds forced open' in something like real time. Nevertheless, the environmental futures offered by these poems ripple with an anxious urgency redolent of works by the American artist and photographer DM Witman, whose projects variously expose the continued impact of humanity on climate disruption and environmental loss. For her 2015–16 sequence *Melt*, for instance, Witman produced a series of photographs depicting formerly snow-rich landscapes, lifted from the satellite-photographed terrains of Google Earth. Printed using salted paper—an early photographic process dating from the nineteenth century—the pictures started fading once exposed to natural light, allowing Witman to document the disappearance of her snowscapes in a medium that vanishes.

Perhaps inevitably, thinking of *Melt* brings loafing to the stage that other Whitman, too. Casting her imagination out into the 'great forwards and backwards' of time, colliding temporalities—'Is it five

minutes or 500 years', asks 'Thaw'—Graham especially invokes the Whitman of 'Whoever You Are Holding Me Now in Hand' (1860), in which the poet addresses his future readers directly from the page. But whereas Whitman frequently projects himself into a future 'ages hence', Graham's poems more often seem to be transmissions offered back to us—crash-landing into the present 'from the deep future'—as if originally composed at some point further up ahead. This is not the present slipping forwards, increasingly beyond control, so much as the future rushing back, a freight train hurtling towards us. The peculiar futurism of Graham's poetry is confirmed by the presence of several apparently non-human voices, from the not-quite-disembodied speaker of 'Carnation/Re-in'—a relative of Louise Glück's wild iris—to the algorithmic chat-bots of 'In the Nest®' and 'Siri U', who seem to speak a language in the same breath as acquiring it. For all their environmental concern, Graham's poems also appear to question the future place of poetry. What will poems be like, they seem to ask, when there is nothing left to write about and no one left to write it?

The overriding tendency of *Runaway* is a sense of grave inevitability, collapse waiting to happen. 'The Gods themselves cannot recall their gifts,' reads the collection's epigraph, borrowed from Tennyson's 1860 poem 'Tithonus' (another tributary to Oswald), in which the speaker grieves a state of life he no longer has access to. 'But past who can recall, or don undoe?' asks Milton in Book IX of *Paradise Lost* (1667–74), in turn recalling Shakespeare's sleepwalking Lady Macbeth: 'What's / done cannot be undone.' 'Of all risks,' reads a passage from the World Economic Forum's *Global Risks Report* for 2019, 'it is in relation to the environment that the world is most clearly sleepwalking into a catastrophe.'

And yet, despite the water at our feet, Graham seems to find a kind of solace in the world at hand, a present moment—'not-yet-absorbed, not-yet-evaporated'—in which we might discover meaning in a fragment of the whole. '[W]e have to consider the *while*,' suggest the closing lines of 'All', in which 'we are not nothing'. Know that 'you are always in the holy place,' urges 'Exchange', 'Because / just being in it makes

it holy. Uphold it. Linger. Be eternal for this / instant.' This is a transcendence—becoming 'eternal'—that recalls Ralph Waldo Emerson, particularly his 'Self-Reliance' (1841), in which he argues that man 'does not live in the present, but with reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround him, stands on tiptoe to foresee the future'. For Emerson, as for Graham, we must learn to live with nature in the present moment, somehow 'above time', not within it. In the collection's final poem, this act is figured as a mode of accidental listening, a tuning-in to hear the world we so often drown out. 'I hear it—I / hear it every- / where', writes Graham, and

The earth  
said remember

me. I am the  
earth it said. Re-  
member me.