

## TREMORS AND ELECTRICITY

*Jorie Graham, Fast, Carcanet, £12.99, ISBN 9781784104702*  
*Pauline Stainer, Sleeping Under the Juniper Tree, Bloodaxe, £9.95,*  
*ISBN 9781780373416*

Kit Fan tunes in to the wavelengths of two charged voices

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**J**orie Graham's *Fast* is a breathtaking meditation in an emergency, a reflection of our time reconfigured by technology, overshadowed by war, threatened by environmental change, dominated by human greed, and haunted by sickness and bereavement. "Each epoch dreams the one to follow", the speaker in the title poem says, "To dwell is to leave a trace. / I am not what I asked for." From dream to dwelling to a trace, the poem captures human aspiration, our desire for continuity, and the risk of isolation and extinction against "the machine-gun run" of technological advancement including "the bot" and its uncanny, artificial intelligence. "Ready yourself to be buried in voice", the speaker in 'Fast' warns. The book presents a firework display of voices as distant as the "dead zones → bigger than the Sahara" in 'Deep Water Trawling'; as terrifying as "the clenched fist of the present instant" in 'Dementia', and as heartbreaking as a "phantom / father-body" with his "suit laid out" in 'Reading to My Father'.

In poem after poem, Graham invents, dismantles, and reinvents both the human and the mechanical voice, casting it out in poetic forms that

push the limit of the lines and punctuation, time and grammar, breath and silence, and yet simultaneously record our “small desires and fundamental fears” from sunrise to sundown and all the minutes in between, confirming that for us creatures of time, “earth was the place to be”.

At the core of *Fast* are some of the most moving, personal and original elegies since Thom Gunn’s *The Man with Night Sweats* (1992). Peter Sacks in his seminal *The English Elegy* (1985) observes that “few elegies or acts of mourning succeed without seeming to place the dead, and death itself, at some cleared distance from the living”. Graham poignantly paces this elegiac distance by recreating the experience of time passing on the page, recounting in an almost documentary way, minute-by-minute, death’s arrival and departure in ‘The Post Human’, when the speaker realises: “It has been just a minute now – I don’t want the time to go in this direction – it does. / Now it has been two.” This super close-up on time creates an unsettling intimacy with the parting of the body, as well as the memory and rhythm between the dying, the dead, and the speaker. There are many sunrises, sunsets, shadows, birdcalls, trees, leaves and rivers in these elegies, but they are accompanied by multiple questions without question marks, numerous “→” signs with their strangely neutral directional logic, as well as the proliferation of signature Grahamesque brackets and dashes – as if quotidian natural forces and linguistic possibilities complement and propel the work as the poet grapples with one of the most personal of all losses, that of her father. In ‘Vigil’, the speaker speaks of “all flow, cluster, possibility, speed – stirred but / not stirred-for”. In elegy after elegy, the poems’ meandering flow, shape and voice conjure up not only a fierce Beckettian vocal velocity, but also a “slow grace” that includes “a small mudwasp [...] building a nest”, a “blackbird and the shoo of air where it lifts off”, and “the blue-jewel-/ butterfly you loved”. These luminous details appear like visitations and coincidences that transport the reader from a rigorous thinking pace to familiar earthbound territory, what the speaker in ‘We’ calls a “with-time-ness” that is full of tenderness, unpredictability, and the potential for consolation.

One way of tuning into the protean voice in *Fast* is by observing the dizzying interplay of pronouns in Graham’s machinery of poetic address, working at the heart of her powerhouse of intimacy and emotion. In ‘Cryo’, a poem about cryopreservation and human perpetuity, the speaker, as she imagines leaping from “one sort of being / immaterial to another”, says that “my no-me comes around”. While the first person acts as a centrifugal

force, the poem is supported by other unexpected gravitational voices like the fourteenth-century mystic Julian of Norwich, as the speaker asks “who is the ‘he’ that cannot / exist without him”. Towards the end of ‘The Mask Now’, one of the most compelling elegies in the book, the poem shifts from the third person (“He was a settler in that flesh”) to the second (“you are a purpose surrounded by chance, a / hole in chance”), opening up a heartbreaking intimacy by directly addressing the dying. Equally moving is the last poem, ‘Mother’s Hands Drawing Me’, in which the speaker’s mother “not wanting to / die”, is “scared awakening / each night thinking she’s dead”. Reading *Fast* is like having deep, tortured and spontaneous conversations with oneself and one’s nearest and dearest in a world overcome by a vertiginous sense of disappearance. It is a tour-de-force and Graham’s most memorable book to date.

On the page Pauline Stainer’s poems seem worlds apart from Jorie Graham’s. While Graham expands, Stainer condenses lines, shapes, and voice. On closer reading however, her ninth collection operates on a meditative wavelength as sharp, difficult, and various as Graham’s. Like Graham, Stainer engages with science with an unflinching curiosity and precision, juxtaposing the spiritual and the technical, as the speaker in the title poem observes, “The angels glowed like phosphors / but gave out no heat.” Stainer’s quiet, exquisite eloquence has often been praised, but what makes her poems distinctive and magical is their scale – polished, crystalline, self-contained like a prism that refracts light and reveals the invisible world with what in ‘Lute-maker in a North Light’ she calls “the patience of tranquil alignment”. Alignment suggests an insight into proportion, and Stainer’s poems inherit a seemingly uncalculated fearful symmetry in form and voice, as if each note pulsed with a yearning for the golden mean, or as the speaker in ‘Nativity with Beehives’ observes “the alchemical number of perfection”.

Her risky, high-precision art, however, does not distract the reader but instead focuses the mind on the “vibrancy of absence”, as when in ‘Avoriaz’ the speaker remembers “a cube of mist” in a ski-resort. “Everything attuned to erasure”, the speaker says in ‘The Invisible Year’, and Stainer’s poems are full of gravitations towards silence, disappearance, and nothingness, unafraid to tease out and heighten the tension between the physical and the metaphysical. The “many soundless imprints” in ‘Spring Snow’, for example, are “the pressures of snow / on the spoor of creatures”. What she describes as “saying the unsayable” in ‘Borderland’ is the “eel-

grass" and "the wind in the reeds" that make us feel like "the world is hung / on nothing". "The heart was / the gaze of silence" the speaker says in the mysterious poem 'The Marvellous Blemish' in which she finds "nanocrystals / under the chameleon's skin".

Like Graham, Stainer often positions the human at an unlikely, off-centre angle, allowing us "to quibble with wilderness" in a series of magical natural historical encounters with a "girdled lizard", "golden mole", "mummified baby mammoth", "great grey owl", "silkmoth", "sleeping lotus", "hunting cat", "balsam poplars", "dew-eagle", "Mondaytown bat", and "merlin / smallest of falcon". In this extraordinary array of animals wild and domestic, plants familiar and exotic, Stainer has the Delphic gift of recording "unrelated things singing to themselves", like the speaker in 'Alchemist in Search of a Voice' who captures "the lure of the unsaid / still withholding its miracle". In the miraculously questioning poem 'The Nine of Hares', at one moment we find hares "every which way / in glistening diagonals" and the next, as the line shifts, we are left wondering "are they celebrating / otherness, / being out of the body".

Reading Stainer's new book is like taking part in an Olympic poetic relay, with certain words apparently accidentally carried across from one poem to the next, as when 'Percussion' ends with "flash / my closed lids" and the following poem, 'Hindsight', begins "That flash as cheetahs". This seamless wordplay runs through the entire collection, as words and poems echo each other with an unforced, peculiar beauty.

*Sleeping Under the Juniper Tree* is Stainer's most electrifying and imaginative book to date. Despite all the manifest differences between the two books, reading it alongside Graham's *Fast*, you sense an innate transatlantic affinity between these two ontological explorers.

Kit Fan's second collection, *As Slow as Possible*, is forthcoming from Arc in 2018.