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Posthuman Poetics

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'I was very lucky. The end of the world had already occurred [...] You have to keep living. You have to make it not become waiting'. Graham's *Fast* occupies a different space – temporally and emotionally – to her previous collections. Writing nearly a decade ago, in *Sea Change*, Graham considered 'where we are headed' and found that this 'desire to imagine / the future' is analogous to 'walking in the dark through a house you know by / heart'. Certain poems underlined the arrogance and ignorance of fearlessly thinking we can predict the future. *Fast*, on the other hand, does not speak of imagining the future. In this collection, we seem to have arrived.

In 'Self Portrait at Three Degrees', Graham writes:

Teasing out the possible linkages I – no you – who noticed – if the
world – no –
the world if – take plankton – I feel I cannot love anymore

Syntactically, it's difficult to keep track of these 'linkages', but the title sets a semi-recognisable backdrop of connection. Evoking the 'three degrees of influence' (a version of six degrees of separation), it's impossible not to also think of climate change and the scientific predications of what will happen to a planet that becomes three degrees warmer. Idiomatically, the Amazon Rainforest might be considered as the lungs of the planet, but in this poem planktonic organisms are found to be 'the most important plant on earth – think love – composes at least half / the biosphere's entire primary production'. Emerging from the tiny, often unacknowledged linkages that comprise earth's systems and support life, there is a curious, almost humorous metaphorical relation between love as a reproductive

force, and plankton. What appears to be an inner dialogue expands on the connection:

love this – love what – I am saying
you have no choice [...] everything
living – take it – here you take it, I can't hold it anymore – you don't want it – I
don't care – you carry it for now – I need to catch my breath –

Graham's last collection, *Place*, was, in some part a meditation on the tensions of bringing a child into this world – take the series of interconnected thoughts on cruelty, innocence and determined belief in love in 'Mother and Child (The Road at the Edge of the Field)'. *Fast*, by contrast, begins to suggest how love for the planet, and the responsibility that comes with this love, becomes a baby-like burden the speaker seeks to shift. There is an exhilarating movement between the domestic and the global in 'Self Portrait at Three Degrees' that raises questions about our limits of connection and about the subsequent difficulty in holding such planetary scales in mind, let alone in heart.

Ecological themes in Graham's past collections have tended towards the issues of extinction and climate change. To focus on issues less-widely covered by the media – the earth's dependence on plankton and on practices such as deep water trawling – is not only admirable, but under Graham's poetic control, also surprisingly moving. 'Deep Water Trawling' examines a process in which trawling nets raze parts of seabeds, creating a 'mouth the size of a football field'. It is possible that Graham's occasional explication of terms 'what is bycatch – hitting the wrong target – the wrong size – not / eaten' means that the reader isn't forced to turn to Google, but it is her skill in layering, confusing and thereby connecting vocabularies that is most engaging. When poetry about environmental issues offers argument or criticism, this polemic angle is often met with wariness: poets are seen to be sermonising. But Graham's juxtaposition of lines makes any sense of the polemic feel accidental: her lightness of touch means that the weight of what she writes about is dependent upon how the reader receives it. Consumerist overtones emerge in her vision of this destruction of the ocean

floor where 'there is nothing in / particular you want – you just want'. Once again, Graham is in the business of taking us further if we, as readers, are willing. Drawing no attention to herself, the poet quietly and momentarily embodies the threatened sea creatures themselves: 'we die / of exhaustion or suffocation'. Likewise, 'Did you ever kill a fish. I was once but now I am / human' reminds us of our shared oceanic origins.

Split into three sections, 'Deep Water Trawling' plunges to the depths it describes. At the bottom, we find 'there are no→fish→no organisms→alive→no→no life→so it's just us→dead zones'. Likening these lifeless spaces to the moon, Graham takes us far from home. Then: 'hold on→just a minute please→hold on→there is a call for you'. Reminding us of the transatlantic communications cable laid under the ocean floor, the interruption also has greater significance. These dead zones, created by trawling, but also by pollution, create a wilderness. Whilst there is no explicit human presence – no flag stuck on this empty landscape the way it might be on the moon – humans are everywhere implicated.

Spacing, line breaks and the dash remain integral to Graham's project. Previous collections have explored not only these, but also parentheses and blank spaces that the reader is expected to fill. *Fast* is the first collection to introduce the arrow. It might be said that in a poem like 'Deep Water Trawling', the arrow takes us down to a deeper, darker space. However, given the arrow's appearance in a number of poems throughout the collection, it has a range of effects. The most obvious and powerful of these is the way the arrow forces the reader onwards. Recent developments in eye-tracking technology have led to a number of studies on reading and the extent to which the eye jumps between lines of a poem: of how much a reader might double back, check, continue. With Graham's arrow, there is no going back. The dash might simultaneously connect and separate, but with its little sharp point the arrow hastens us forward, enacting the title of the collection. *Fast* might be at once a period of abstinence, an imperative (to act against ecological catastrophe?), but perhaps also a reference to The Great Acceleration in which our global economic system has been controlling the earth's natural systems since the industrial revolution.

Time has always been a preoccupation of Graham's. In writing *Never* (2002), she aimed to enact 'the rate of extinction [that] is estimated at one every nine minutes'. In 2017, with no sign of rates such as these slowing down, but, rather, an increase in speed (and even an addiction to technological acceleration), the arrow increases the futility of Graham's plea in 'The Post Human': 'I don't want the time to go in this direction'. As 'The Post Human' narrates the death of Graham's father, this plea takes on greater immediacy.

Standing next to you, holding the hand which stiffens, am I
outside of it more than before, are you not inside?

The aluminium shines on your bedrail where the sun hits. It touches it.

The sun and the bedrail – do they touch each other more than you and I now.

As one of the opening poems of the collection's second section, death prompts a meditation on relationality, response and distance. Do inanimate objects have more vitality than a body within no one inside? The questions continue. 'Am I to think / you now / natural?' Strange paradoxes are made between what is human and what is natural, between the stopping of time and relentless progression: 'Have we caught up with / where we just were?'

Graham's title of the poem refers quite literally to the post-human – to the end of a human life – but a more theoretical reflection might also be present here. Heralded as the new 'ism' in philosophy and critical theory, posthumanism aims to depart from anthropocentric discourse. Posthumanist scholars have focused on ideas of objecthood, animal ontology and technological entanglements with the human. Whether or not Graham is exactly a posthumanist, it is exciting to see emergent theoretical questions and concerns creatively developed in *Fast*. In the title poem of the collection, Graham asks 'Will we survive I ask the bot. No'. Here, the lack of a question mark seems to presuppose the answer. Graham blurs natural and artificial intelligence. Where is the divide between cyborg and human in 'We are not alone. We are looking to improve'? Is this 'we' us, or them? Unrelenting in the way it shifts the ground we stand upon, *Fast* also shakes the 'the tiny nation state which is / you, your you' ('To Tell of Bodies

Changed to Different Forms'). To be swept off one's feet might be a clichéd phrase we reserve for romance, but the passionate and overwhelming nature of Graham's undertaking has not dissimilar effect. 'Have you failed to / make your / self?' might conjure our obsessive creating of virtual selves on social media, but a (re)construction of the physical self occurs too. Small details such as 'watch breasts grow as the buttonwood grows' brings into relation The New York Stock Exchange, begun with an agreement signed under a buttonwood tree in 1792, and surgical breast enlargement. Natural, financial and physical (mis)conceptions of progress are condensed into one surprisingly lyrical line that is all the more unsettling for its quiet nature.

Graham's departures in pronoun, idea and punctuation are matched by new explorations in sound and image. Writing about her own experience of having cancer, 'From Inside the MRI' begins with a gripping revision of Gerard Manley Hopkins's 'The Windhover'

– my sub-
tropical dancer, partner, or is it birdchatter I'm hearing now, vein in,
contrast-drip begun, everything being sung in the magnetic field's no-upward-rung

Throughout the collection there are a number of instances in which birdsong is confused with a cellphone's ringtone. Such misperceptions are heightened in this hospital setting as Graham's internal rhymes and repetitions – 'high high not not not highnot highnot' – skip on Hopkins's poem as if it were a scratched record to reproduce the weird soundscape of the MRI scan. The rhythm of a line has always been important to Graham. In interviews she has spoken of the time spent revising the poems she writes; attending to the music of each line. With its occasionally intense internal rhymes, we are introduced to new musical textures. The 3D printer and 3D glasses that feature in 'from The Enmeshments' are anticipated in the vibrations within particular lines: 'It's too abstract. I have no contract. Cannot enact impact / interact. Look: the mirrored eye of the fly, so matter of fact.' At times these sounds seem strong enough to break from the page into physical dimensions.

Whilst sensuality has always been present in Graham's work, the palpable, tangible quality of *Fast* distinguishes it, especially in relation to Graham's early collections. Although it is impractical to summarise her previous work, to some degree this poetry has been marked by its fraught, self-reflexive relationship between self and world. In many instances this has concerned the subjective, lyrical 'I' and its perceiving of the external world. In her debut, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980), the speaker is, for example, self-consciously absorbed in her appropriative representation of wildflowers: 'Yes should I draw it changing, making of the flower a kind of mind' ('Drawing Wildflowers'). Whether it's because Graham's subjects have ranged between art, philosophy, history, and religion, or because, at times, her writing has been concerned about writing in (what is often reductively labeled as) a postmodern aesthetic, critics have often suggested that Graham's poetry is difficult poetry. Sometimes this difficulty has led critics to accuse Graham of neglecting her reader and of creating introspective work. Examining her writing in relation to ecopoetry, Leonard Scigaj once said that it 'divorces us too far from the practical world'. *Fast* does much to put these criticisms to rest.

Should poems about ecological destruction, political genocide and questionable social concepts of progress fail to convince the reader of this, then surely those poems about the illnesses and deaths of Graham's father and her mother will. In the last section of the book, 'The Mask Now' describes her father's prolonged death:

In last weeks wore red sleepmask over eyes day and night. Would ride it up onto his forehead for brief intervals, then down, pulled by hand that still worked. A bit. Sometimes shaking too much so just cried eyes. Cried now now. Once cried out light – more like a hiss – was there for that.

The protracted horror of the scene feels Beckettian and is pursued in 'Mother's Hands Drawing Me':

dying – mother not wanting to
die – mother scared awakening
each night thinking she's dead –
[...] now saying I
dreamt I have to get this dress on, if
I get this dress on I will not die –
mother who cannot get the dress on
because of broken hip and broken
arm and tubes and coils and pan

These intimate portrayals of death are deeply painful and affecting elegies in which both mother and father appear desperate to keep their hold on life. After Graham writes of her father who 'Wants trans-/ fusions which we withhold [...] Would buy no // time', anecdote becomes metaphor: ' "I've wrapped stumps in / black plastic when they've refused to die" says Leila, location Wellington, / posted 4 years ago on permagardening'. Whilst such lines are distressing to read, curiously, a certain tenacity comes to the fore that evokes, perhaps in a more poignantly quotidian manner, Dylan Thomas's 'Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night'. As a way of concluding the book, these poems bring a slight glimmer of hope. *Fast* might immerse us in monstrous acts of environmental and political violence, our obsession with progress, money, and our own individualistic, virtual worlds, but what still succeeds is the wish to live on. Perhaps if we were to listen to that wish we might, amongst all the acceleration, stop and think again as if it weren't, in the words of 'Cryo', 'too late'.