The Guardian

Interview

Jorie Graham: 'I am living in the late season, but it has its songs, too'

By Aida Edemariam

The Pulitzer-winning poet on mortality, makeup and capturing life's complexity

Fri 1 Dec 2017 07.00 EST Last modified on Thu 22 Feb 2018 09.27 EST

The last lines of the last poem in Jorie Graham's most recent collection, *FAST*, imagine dawn giving way to day: "Leaving / grackle and crow in the sun - they have / known what to find in the unmade / undrawn unseen unmarked and / dragged it into here - that it be / visible" - which is as good a way as any of summing up what Graham has tried to do ever since she began writing poems: to look hard at the world around her, especially the natural world, but also at the hard questions - what does it all mean and what is it all for? To stay as open as possible in order to catch whatever answer there might be unawares, and hold it up to the light.

Nothing is out of bounds - geese, laundry, erosion, materialism, psychiatric wards, sex, Plato (she is not a fan), Heidegger, bots, relativity, the Holocaust, Genesis, classical mythology, Genesis, "the

moral pleasure / of experiencing the distance between subject and object", water (always water). Now, in *FAST*, her subject is mortality - her own (she was diagnosed with cancer five years ago), her parents', that of intellect and culture (in dementia, in digital overwhelm), that of the planet. It is a collection of sensual poems so urgent that, by the end, they have abandoned traditional beginnings and are physically bunched up on the right-hand side of the page. And through it all, an unwavering, serious belief in the power of poetry, a repeatedly inhabited rejection of Auden's assertion that poetry makes nothing happen.

Some of this - whose lines fragment across the page into single words or abrupt phrases that fail to reach across silence, bumping loving endearments up against the idea of atoms, of "infinite smallness / * / which occasions incorruption or immortality" - has earned her, in some quarters, a reputation for difficulty, for writing "unintelligible" poetry "deliberately intended to frustrate the reader", according to the critic Adam Kirsch. A review in the New York Times of Overlord (2005), entitled "Jorie Graham, Superstar", called it poetry to soothe "the art form's nagging status anxiety (anything involving this much Heidegger must be important) ... there's always been something strangely bleary in Graham's writing - as if she's just noticed something interesting and motioned the reader over, only to stand in his light, blocking his view with her own viewing."

"People who approach poetry expecting the reading habits they use for prose to function are going to require a kind of poetry that is essentially prose broken into lines; a dramatic monologue of a certain kind, with an autobiographical feel," says Graham. There are great proponents of this form, she adds: Sharon Olds, for instance, or Philip Levine. "If you know how to read novels, you know how to read their poems - although that's an illusion, because you don't, really, but at least you have the illusion that they're not resistant to you."

Graham, who won a Pulitzer in 1996 for her selected poems 1974-1994, *The Dream of the Unified Field*, is currently Boylston professor of rhetoric and oratory at Harvard, a post first held by John Quincy Adams into which she followed Seamus Heaney and in which she was the first woman. She is grand and glamorous, aware of her glamour, but also warmly approachable, a virtuosic talker, whose sentences - veering off in multiple directions, but somehow still holding their thread - create a conspiratorial, generous space and control it, not least because it is not always easy to get a word in edgeways (although, once you do, her listening is disconcertingly acute). "Eliot is an example of someone who says, in *The Waste Land*, 'suspend the desires of the conceptual intellect - the desire to know who's speaking, where you are, what they're about - and read with your ear, read with your body'. If you're not reading with the part that's asking for a confession, but with your ability to associate, your intuition, your sense that this moves by analogy to that - you're familiar with surrealism, symbolism, modernism, you understand that, as in film, things can be adjacent and the adjacency creates a glow of meaning - then you have no problem, because you're not asking a poem to be a single individual narrative telling you about a life," she says.

Much has always been made of Graham's life, especially the early years: she was born in New York City in 1950, to a mother who was a visual artist, but grew up in Italy, where, because her father was a journalist, "the Rome bureau of Newsweek was in the two rooms next to my bedroom", as she told the Paris Review in 2003. "Painters, film-makers, war photographers, novelists, socialites, philosophers, politicians, rock stars, prelates, starlets - the whole mess of it - floated through our house." Her first typewriter was "an Olivetti portable with a bullet hole in it" (her father had used it in Sinai, Egypt); the parties that went on downstairs were attended by a who's who of la dolce vita. But she insists now that, because Americans are "so provincial", their

perceptions of her youth are overdone. She says her family was never well off - "they were surviving from one sale of my mother's work to another", while the "castle" in Umbria to which they eventually moved, "had pigs living in it; my mother rebuilt it" - and that she was a child, and then a teenager, "having all the social problems you have at that age".

What she did do was listen to her parents' guests and the ways in which they related to each other; to Italian, the language of her childhood, and then to French, when she attended a lycée (her first poetry was in French). And she imagined: the layers of history on which their house sat, for instance, working her way back from modern Rome through to Romulus and Remus on an Etruscan hillside; or, after her class was sent to Florence to help in the rescue effort after a flood and she reached into the muddy water to pull out what turned out to be a gold-illuminated medieval manuscript, to simultaneous histories and competing voices.

She is struck by the fact that, in mainland Europe, where she has been much translated, "cultures where a massive amount of poetry is read by a lot of the population," she is not thought of as difficult. "When I began, poetry was taught in the schools and, at all ages, people recited it," she says. These days, she adds an hour to each class she teaches, purely for the purpose of memorising poems, fighting against the fact that "now we live in a world where people read the synopsis and one chapter of a novel if you're lucky". She points out that, although she provides poems from across written time and from many cultures, her students, even those who have strong political objections to the dead white male canon, almost always end up learning poems from a small pool: Eliot, Yeats, Hopkins, Wallace Stevens. "If they're going to recite it in their mouths, their throats, everything that is their instrument, their personal lyre, they want the sound of that music."

In 1968, she went to the Sorbonne to study philosophy. The student leader Daniel Cohn-Bendit was her classmate; she joined in the protests that erupted that May and was arrested. In "The Hiding Place" (*Region of Unlikeness*), she writes of being in a cell so crowded that "I felt a girl / vomiting gently onto my back".

Foreign students were sent home, so she found herself studying film in New York, partly because images were a universal language and her English was patchy. These days, she sounds American, but those first 20-odd years create a clear and generative distance, that "if this is the vantage point" - she points to a space just behind her eyes - "you also have this one" - pointing to another space further back - "or this one. I've always felt like a bit of a voyeur in America." Her great fear, when her mother dies, is that the link with Italy, with Europe, will be broken and "then I will be just an American. I won't know what to do."

Graham came to poetry in an oft-rehearsed Damascene moment, when, lost in the campus at NYU, she walked past a classroom and heard a voice reading what turned out to be "The Love Song of J Alfred Prufrock" (although she has less frequently pointed out that she was lost because she had been at a dinner party the night before and someone had put pot in the food), felt Eliot's music and "thought: I could learn English this way". Eliot still tolls through her work like an undersea bell: in *FAST*, human voices join inhuman voices and intelligences - the sea floor, bots, a medium (Madame Sosostris? "Yes, Madame Sosostris"), chemicals, 3D printers - in what becomes a kind of *Waste Land* for the digital age. (Unlike the "human voices wake us, and we drown" of "Prufrock", however, Graham's aim is to be awake - as awake as possible.) Dashes, used liberally in her work, are here joined by arrows, adding to the hurtling sensation of reading the collection, its anxiety and urgency.

She married, briefly, then was married again, to Bill Graham, son of Katherine and Philip Graham, who owned Newsweek and the Washington Post. Ted Kennedy and Robert McNamara were at her wedding; the details of Watergate were thrashed out around their dining room tables. She has said that those years in Washington "allowed me to see how fragile the instinct to do the right - or generous - thing is, what forces it is up against, how unmonolithic those forces are, how much they are, instead, a composite of human fears, human blindness, well-intentioned moral clumsiness. That was scary. But I was privileged, there in those historic moments, to witness, up close, a few rare souls act with truly astonishing bravery. And there's no doubt that watching a 'rough draft of history' weave itself out of small daily acts affected my work." She was often away, however, at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, writing; when her marriage to Graham came apart she moved to Iowa full time, meeting a fellow poet, James Galvin, and, eventually, after many miscarriages, giving birth to a daughter, Emily. She has a story she tells, wryly, that gives a real sense of the person she was then, of being rushed to hospital in an ambulance during yet another miscarriage, because of fears that she was suffering a pulmonary embolism. "All I could think about was Yeats's idea of the self and the soul, the immortality of the soul, and did I believe it - I just wanted to make sure if I knew whether I believed it, in case I became unconscious. When I came out of it, I thought: 'I think I must be really committed to this poetry stuff.'" In much-anthologised poem "Wanting a Child", only the title makes it clear that this is its subject. It begins: "How hard it is for the river here to re-enter / the sea, though it's most beautiful, of course, in the waste of time where it's almost / turned back." When Emily was small, they spent long summers in Wyoming, far from the city, chopping wood, riding, using an outhouse, watching geese fly over as she put out the laundry, where "we live beneath these geese / as if beneath the passage of time". This becomes a meditation on the relationship between body and soul, where body is "an arrival / you know is false but can't outrun".

She has always been wary of writing about her daughter, doing it instead as double self-portraits (as Apollo and Daphne, as Hurry and Delay) - to catch at the way she felt doubled in pregnancy - or, more directly, in an extraordinary poem, "The Dream of the Unified Field", where, returning to drop off a forgotten leotard, she finds herself looking into a window from the dark outside, watching her daughter dancing, imagining the first arrival of white explorers on that same land, the simultaneity of time passing.

"What interests me about poetry as a medium is that it tends to make reality - that we in many ways oversimplify in order to survive it - as complex as it needs to be again, as filled with contradiction as it needs to be," she says now. After 9/11, she and a few other poets went around the country giving readings. Anyone who had a complex response - Susan Sontag, for instance, who suggested that, whatever else you thought of the pilots, they weren't cowards - was being vociferously attacked, "so part of what we were able to do with the poems was to say, 'You can feel this way *and* that. You can feel rage and curiosity and some form of … respect - and horror about the same event and your soul is only going to be the larger for it.'"

In 2015, reviewing Graham's *From the New World: Poems 1976-2014* for the New York Times, the critic Craig Morgan Teicher came to the conclusion that some of the tenor of criticism she had received came from the "same old, ugly, entrenched reasons: fellow poets, critics, even readers are threatened by Jorie Graham because she is brilliant, difficult, confrontational, empowered and visionary. Most of all, she has not let the fact that she is a woman dim or compromise any of these qualities." Graham notes that she didn't realise, until 20 years into her career, that people were having these issues. "When I was young, I never felt beautiful, but when I look at the pictures, I think: 'Oh, shit, she really was beautiful'. I didn't hide in the way I probably should have - I never

tied my hair back – but, you know, I was an Italian. So, I wore makeup and I wore jewellery and, if there was anything that was an affront, it was that a woman was performing her womanhood like that. I think that was a very un-American way to be."

FAST opens with a quote from Browning: "Then the good minute goes. / Already how am I so far / Out of that minute?" It comes not only late in her career and in her life, a gathering for which she feels she has been preparing always – "You *have* to be ready for the late work. Make sure you develop a toolkit that's wide enough for every middle stage and especially for the end" – but also is imbued, through and through with a feeling of "too-lateness": we meet her father as a body, after he has died; that last poem begins with her mother's hands drawing her in the air but is also about her mother having disappeared into dementia; we are almost too late climatically, perhaps too late in terms of "what we've done, digitally, to a generation".

"I am living in the late season," says Graham, but "but it has its songs, too. I have to find what they are. I wouldn't be writing the poems if I didn't think they were leading to a kind of consciousness that would allow one to become more fully awake, even in this period which is trying everything it can to shut one down." Making things visible, looking, feeling – "they are my form of resistance".

Topics

Poetry

A life in ...