The Actual Hawk, the Real Tree

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Place
by Jorie Graham.
Ecco, 79 pp., $15.99 (paper)

1.

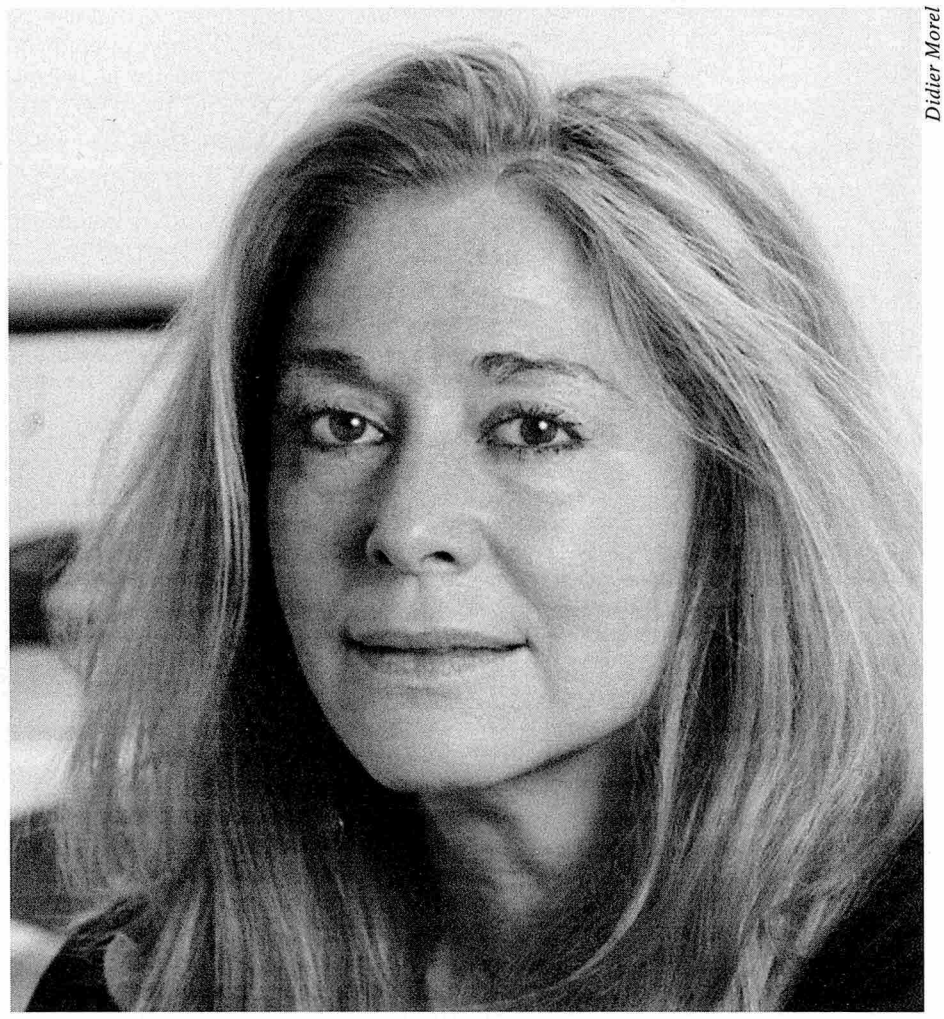
Place is Jorie Graham's twelfth book of poems, her first since *Sea Change* in 2007. The title recalls an earlier volume, *Region of Unlikeness*, but the word "place" all on its own is so bland as to be a seriously polemical title for a book: we can think of many books of poems named for a place (*North of Boston*, *Water Street*, *Paterson*) but none called simply "place," as though forfeiting any further specificity. Graham has often used one-word titles (*Materialism*, *Swarm*, *Never*), but never a single word so apparently deficient in philosophical or sensory content. It is a word waiting to be filled in, a blank, a placeholder: it clears the ground upon which the poems themselves will build.

Place is in fact full of vividly described real places, notably the Normandy coast, where Graham and her husband owned a sixteenth-century house (they have now sold it). This is the milieu of Graham's last few books. Few European landscapes have been so lavishly depicted by an American poet, but Graham, who was raised in Rome by American parents, has always seemed the most European of American poets. The landscape is notable, of course, for its fresh scars from the D-Day invasions. But Omaha Beach is a perfect wading beach, shallow and still; you can now stand upon it, alongside French children building sand castles, and find, on your iPhone, a Robert Capa battle photo of your exact spot. (I have done this.) The tall shore grasses occasionally yield bits of artillery shells, but mainly the beach is now as it had always been before June 6, 1944.

Place opens with a poem set on Omaha called "Sundown," written in the rapid, jittery, code-red style of *Sea Change*, long lines broken by eruptions of short lines, long, unpunctuated sentences made to tighten and loosen like the clenching of some massive fist:

> *Sometimes the day*
> *light winces*
> *behind you and it is*
> *a great treasure in this case a man on*
> *a horse in calm full*
> *gallop on Omaha over my*
> *left shoulder coming on*
> *fast but*
> *calm not audible to me at all until*
> *I turned back my*
> *head for no*
> *reason as if what lies*
> *behind*
> *one had whispered*
> what can I do for you today

Line breaks never coincide with sentence units; often a line ends just as a new, unpunctuated "sentence" opens. "Ecstasy provides the occasion/And expediency provides the form," Marianne Moore advises. Graham's lines are expedient in precisely this way: every sentence gallops toward a point of conflict with the line, a little like that horse and rider gaining upon, then overtaking, the poet out for her evening walk.



Didier Morel

Jorie Graham, Écrammeville, France, March 2011

"Sundown" is a poem about the arrival of joy where one had reserved a place for dismay. That horse and rider is part angel, part emergency; it is up to Graham to figure it out, a hard task to perform in the real-time rush as it overtakes you. These kinds of wildly unsteady vantage points are Graham's specialty. Robert Lowell could observe the skunks at the end of "Skunk Hour" from the top of his back steps; Frost's great poem "The Most of It" measures the gradually collapsing distance between his protagonist and the "great buck" that swims across the lake toward him. A little anthology of animal poems could be assembled, and every one of them would have the observer/poet in fixed, stable position (Elizabeth Bishop's "The Moose" has her and her fellow bus passengers "grind to a halt" to behold the titular moose).

The stateliness those poems display has never been Graham's kind of thing: sometimes she strikes me as a gondolier who took a sudden turn and finds herself hurtling down a stretch of white water. "Sundown" continues:

> *and I had just*
> *turned to*
> *answer and the*
> *answer to my*
> *answer flooded from the front*
> *with the late sun he/they*
> *were driving into—*
> *gleaming—*
> *wet chest and*
> *upraised knees and*
> *light-struck hooves and thrust-out*
> *even breathing of the great*
> *beast*

The poem mocks the kinds of polite greetings and exchanges that mark our meetings with strangers ("what can I do for you today"), subordinating all human activity to the scary magnificence of that creature, whose "gleaming—wet chest" and "light-struck hooves" provide the only "answer" and, in doing so, clarify the nature of the question.

If another poet—Moore or Frost, for example—had written "Sundown," the stream of sensory information would have been broken by a maxim or an adage or a moral: something, anything to represent the kind of counterpressure our intellects make when confronted with a surplus of sensation. Graham's forms of counterpressure are subtler, more provisional, more subject to the pressures they paradoxically contest—and, if what one wants from a poem is paraphrasable content, less satisfying. Her deep distrust of statement makes Graham search for alternate forms of interruption; it is as though this sensibility were too immersed in the current of ongoing sensation to be able to retreat, even for a moment, from it.

Graham's poems about the stream of experience are part of the stream, a fact that has made her style unusually closely linked to the themes it takes on. They are, for example, full of participles, and always have been: in the transformation of action to attribute, of verb to adjective, Graham finds a kind of fly-by mastery of experience that her perceptual rigor will allow. The world of these poems is perpetually "galloping," "scattering," "screeching," "mewing," "revealing," and "carving," among many other activities. The action is ongoing; the poems merely sample from it. In "Sundown," horse and rider and sunset and sea are out there; we pass through them; when the poem ends, they do not end.

And yet, right in the midst of all this vertiginous activity, these poems often seek the kind of external verification of our existence that Graham once would have avoided. It is as though anything short of spoken (or otherwise manifest) confirmation of being alive is a proof to the contrary, and it is Graham's form of announcing, in these twilit poems, a later phase in her art. The proof can come in explicit affirmation:

> *this world that*
> *was, just minutes ago, the only*
> *one that*
> *was, you're in it*
> *now, say* yes
> *out loud*
> (Torn Score)

Or it may come in repeated, therefore repeatable, sensation, as when one walks every day in the same field and sees the same dead tree and the same hawk upon one of its branches:

> *And that you hold the same one*
> *hawk each day I pass through*
> *my field*
> *up. And that it*
> *may choose its*
> *spot so*
> *freely, from which to scan, and,*
> *without more than the*
> *wintry beguiling*
> *wingstrokes seeding*
> *the fields of air,*
> *swoop.*

Or, redoing the scene from the dead tree's point of view, in simple ontology, as when the tree, now deprived of the "truths" of "summer or winter," its "prime," and its "year," represents "just a still-being-here in this small apparently silent multitudinous world of/ infinite yearning."

The craving for literal existence—the actual hawk, the real, though dead, tree, the word "yes" spoken aloud—puts these poems at odds with the kind of figurative language poetry usually takes as its stock and trade. "Sundown" ends with an odd simile that acts, in fact, as an anti-simile:

> *and when I shut my eyes I am*
> *not like a blind person*
> *walking towards the*
> *lowering sun,*
> *the water loud at my right,*
> *but like a seeing person*
> *with her eyes shut*
> *putting her feet down*
> *one at a time*
> *on the earth.*

It is the quality of some poems to transport us, by form, cadence, or figure, out of the actual and concrete world of earthly existence. Not "Sundown" and the many poems here that follow its lead: this poem orients us spatially—the water at our right, the setting sun up ahead—and plants our feet "one at a time/on the earth." That renunciation of the figurative description ("blind person") for the literal one

("seeing person/with her eyes shut") is an emblem for this entire book.

2.

Graham has always been a poet of time and time's enigmas, as the titles of some of her best-known poems suggest: "Self Portrait as Hurry and Delay," "The End of Beauty," "The Phase after History." To put her "feet down/one at a time" is the kind of ambition we associate with a different kind of poet, but then, this is a slightly different kind of Jorie Graham book: retrospective, twilit, autumnal, a book full of the second looks and revised impressions of a woman coming to terms with having been "condemned to this one soul." Graham's work has often suggested the ways selves, in their mutability and broad dispersals, resemble waves and fields (her selected poems was titled, after an important early poem, *The Dream of the Unified Field*; a later volume was titled *Swarm*). Often she has sought forms for these paradoxical and counterintuitive images for what and who we are.

No swarm or field would write, of its childhood, these lines:

> *I am the only one who ever lived*
> *who remembers*
> *my mother's voice in the*
> *particular shadow*
> *cast by the skyfilled Roman*
> *archway*
> *which darkens the stones on the*
> *down-sloping street*
> *up which she has now come again*
> *suddenly.*

The assiduous visual stationing (we are under the archway on a "down-sloping street" "up which" the mother has come) produces, as its end result, an aural memory of a single quoted phrase—*there you are, there you are*—which, in return, stations the speaker. This poem ("Cagnes Sur Mer 1950") imagines Graham's infancy as though it were a memory, blurry but recoverable "from below us":

> *All I was to invent in this life*
> *is there in the wicker basket*
> *among the lemons*
> *having come from below the*
> *horizon where the sound of the*
> *market rises*
> *up into the private air in which*
> *she is moving,*
> *where she is still a whole woman,*
> *and a willing woman,*
> *and I hear what must be prices*
> *and names called out*
> *of flowers and fruit and meat and*
> *live animals in small cages,*
> *all from below us. . . .*
> *I think that was the moment of my*
> *being given my name,*
> *where I first heard the voices*
> *carrying the prices*
> *as her face broke and its smile*
> *appeared bending down*
> *towards me*
> *saying* there you are, there you
> are.

At the other pole from these vanished but eerily and confirmably "real" places—the market with its voices and prices and cages and lemons, the beach at sunset, the field with its single dead tree—are those illusory certainties that, when we lean our weight upon them, give way. One of the most surprising elements of this book is its ferociously topical side—touching, as it does, on the unemployment and foreclosure crises here and in Europe. How on earth do we get from lemons to unemployment lines? In "Employment," a man clutches his number and waits in the long line to be called:

> *and your number, how you*
> *hold it, its promise on its paper,*
> *if numbers could breathe each one*
> *of these would be an*
> *exhalation, the last*
> *breath of something*
> *and then there you have it: stilled:*
> *the exactness: the number: your*
> *number.*

Numbers (an unemployment number, the address of a home, an interest rate) give the feeling of order and stability, but numbers, precisely because they can convey that feeling so effectively, offer the ultimate scam:

> *A number is always hovering over*
> *something beneath it. It is*
> *invisible, but you can*
> *feel it.*

And yet these "numbers" are so vast as to be, in fact, meaningless: "a legion/ single file heading out in formation/ across a desert that will not count."

Because these poems are committed to "this/of which/the real is/just now/made," they show a surprising carte blanche authority to describe whatever, in their enlarged sense of the real, seems this moment to be paramount, whether foreclosure, or flowers, or poems. This, I take it, is the poet's writing desk, where the page filling up with words and the flowers jostle for prominence:

> *Nobody there. The vase of cut*
> *flowers with which the real*
> *is (before us on this page)*
> *permeated—is it a*
> *page—look hard—*
> *(I try)—this*
> *bouquet*
> *in its*
> *vase—tiger dahlias (red and white),*
> *orange freesia (three stalks)*
> *(floating*
> *out), one*
> *large blue-mauve*
> *hydrangea-head,*
> *still*
> *wet*

Poets like to list flowers, but this is a flower audit: a check on claims flowers and poems alike have made to be real in spite of, because of, their imminent deaths.

For their feats of association, for their distrust of plain statement, for their provisional and rapid way of describing experience as it unfolds, Graham's poems have attracted many fans and a few loud naysayers. Every time she publishes a book we have a new opportunity to think about what poetry, driven by one remarkable mind, alone among our written forms can do. The beautiful poems in *Place* remind us that the plainest words and the hardest facts must be sounded for their profoundest and deepest meanings, and that poetry, as pure a decanting of subjectivity as we have ever devised, has a part to play in keeping us all from becoming mere numbers. □