

Here There Be Monsters

A poet of the End Times accelerates into an unimaginable future

DAVID LAU

FAST BY JORIE GRAHAM NEW YORK: ECCO. 96 PAGES. \$26.

With electrifying tension and sustained energy, Jorie Graham's demanding poems assemble ancient and contemporary materials. Adapting Wallace Stevens's philosophical mode, they are poems of the act of the mind—a subject-spirit both metaphysical and resolutely disillusioned. Graham's persona is part Antigone keeping faith in a damaged world, part transcendental aperception. Designed to take the reader into depths, her works also defy the anticipations embedded in their topical frames and pointed digressions (she takes on exploitation of the oceans, the Islamic State, cryogenesis, digital “second” life), which are “yes abstract but not so much there is no / torture,” as she puts it in “Incarnation.” This is creaturely work pained with “shapes” (a preferred term of hers) of the possible future that won't quite come.

Fast, her first collection of entirely new work in five years, offers a nihilistic vision of the present, in which history has left us facing a dead end. Pushing civilization onward brings about yet more extinctions. Social relations in consumer society, the forms of family love, and the civilizing structures of nations give the poet little comfort. The time of an individual life is passing, too, and these are also poems of aging, of MRIs and cancer. The autobiographical “I” that holds all this together goes somewhat against the grain of contemporary poetry, in which the sense of a single consciousness is often attenuated. While Graham has long raided the camp of experimental poets like Michael Palmer and Susan Howe, her poetry derives from personal experiences (knowingly staged ones) and differs from the work of these slightly older peers in its emphasis on dramatic situation. Yet *Fast* will not be easily pinned down. The variety within some individual poems defeats easy sampling. Perhaps in the end she, like Ezra Pound before her, cannot (or will not) make it all cohere.

Graham often begins her approach to a subject or topic from the shadows, but once she grabs hold of a thing she drives on relentlessly. *Fast*—the title suggesting both tempo and asceticism—ferries forward often brutal recognitions of our wreck. The end is now closer for both poet and ecosystem (“the waiting for the end—so much forever to be in till / the forever stops”). The stark newness of this volume may be in its pessimistic warning that, even at this late hour, there are further subjective dissolutions to come. “Here at my screen, / can you make me / out?” asks a posthuman voice, dissipating into what Nicholas Carr calls “the shallows” of the clickstream.

A book whose best passages feature severe contrasts in diction, *Fast* opens with the phrase “Manacled to a whelm” (my gloss: unfreedom in an upsurge of waters). The expression appears in “Ashes,” a short poem that also evokes the title of Graham's earliest collection, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*—itself a phrase lifted from Nietzsche—in its first line: “Asked the plants to give me my small identity. No, the planets.” This playful punning within the vacillations of sound and sense eventually finds its rhythm and momentum: “everything transitioning—unfolding—emptying into a bit more life cell by / cell in wind like this / sound of scribbling on / paper.” Later: “A universe can die.” Yet oddly, ambiguously, the poem is evidence of life. It concludes, “Be happy”—as though beauty, its happiness, could survive cosmic scales of disillusionment to writing “lilies from the acorn” (as Pound wrote).

In “Honeycomb,” the speaker pops up again in what amounts to the digital present: “We need emblematic subjectivities. Need targeted acquiescence. Time zones. This is / the order of the day. To be visited secretly. To be circled and canceled. I cover my / face. Total war: why am I still so invisible to you.” This complexly staged lyric voice inhabits technological development itself, in its warlike revolt against a more human past. Graham emphasizes digital immensity, complicating its domesticated appearance on a computer screen: “In the screen / there is sea. Your fiberoptic cables line its floor.” The remote seafloor, the flickering, unrepresentable permutations of subjectivity—both are brought into the picture, as are newly observable aspects of the body in the later poem “From Inside the MRI”: “It is a nightmare. You

are entirely free. There now, / careful now. You can go.” Poems contrast and develop, following the way of a syntax that at times evades a final predicate. The strongest poems here, in their sentences and pursuits, are formal illustrations of the predicament of *becoming*, its all-over-the-place-ness.

Disturbing environmental trends surface in “Deep Water Trawling,” which takes destructive fishing practices as a roomy motif. Master and shipwreck emerge only after initial lines that peer in on the cutting tools implanted in fishing nets. The posthuman is mirrored back in the churning violence of the technology: “The blades like irises turning very fast to see you completely—steel-blue then red / where the cut occurs—the cut of you—they don't want to know you they want to / own you.” The crisis of the seas today presages the coming-into-being of something cruel and strange in the degraded stages of late capitalism: “not even punishment—



Satellite image of the Mackenzie River and the Atlantic Ocean, Northwest Territories, Canada.

trawling-nets bycatch poison ghostfishing— / the coil of the listening along the very bottom—the nets weighed down with / ballast—raking the bottom looking for nothing.” The blades, the nets, and the fish—they're the reality of both the technological and the toxic-environmental: “net of your listening and my speaking we can no longer tell them / apart—the atmosphere between us turbid—no place to hide—no place to rest.” A twenty-four-hour economy of exploitation and the artificial narrowing of once-limitless subjective horizons are both reflected in a syntax that takes new stances every few phrases. The speaker jokes, “not / regulated are you?”

Graham's historical sense of guilt was formed during the 1980s and '90s, as the US claimed victory in the Cold War. For her, there was no triumphant liberal end of history; instead, she took on new forms and quasi-geopolitical concerns in poems like “Imperialism” and “Short History of the West.” Still, two decades on, who could have imagined the luster fading from brand-name democracy so fast? “→We are in systemicicide→,” she writes in “Shroud,” and “it / is impossible not to hunger for eternity→here on the sand watching the sand-storm approach→.” How to explain these arrows (new to her work), which race through so many of the poems, or even to hear their peculiar intellectual music? Such a sense of historical catastrophe without any saving angels must be directed on to the next phrase, perhaps, lest the sheer face of the nothing continually overwhelm. Recall that we are manacled to it.

In one of the collection's later poems, “Cryo,” the arrow flattens things out, constellating passages of “→arranged terror→,” and we are implored to “→experience swarm fragment→.” If continuity and nature have broken down, along with all other narratives and gods who have died, perhaps an icon of direction is all that can be indicated. Isn't direction just a hurtling forward into yet more destruction? In “Self Portrait at Three Degrees,” the arrows begin in the second stanza, after an opening of em dash—bracketed syntactic scratches and pieces. The effect quickens the poem. Allusions to related concepts of a vast speedup also appear. In “Incarnation,” Graham invokes Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams's fashionable notion of “accelerationism,” with its left-wing dream of a fully automated, alternative-technology socialism. Then the em dashes are abandoned midstanza: “Nothing more. Can a gazelle hold as still. Oh accelerationism. / The *thing* in you now able to be *not seen*. And so there you / are. In the lull you can *not be*. Or not be *seen*.” Daunted, the reader pushes on here, while in other poems the sprawl turns into a blur.

The strongest poems in *Fast* are the many-voiced ones, like “Incarnation.” Decentered, they move at times between a journal of daily activities and encounters recorded as Graham's parents' are dying, and reflections on the sublimity of sex, birth, and death. There are tender moments amid the twenty-first-century chaos. A series of poems devoted to family that appear across the collection include “Dementia,” “Mother's Hands Drawing Me,” and “The Medium,” whose credulousness about communication with Graham's deceased father is hard to reconcile with the book as a whole. Graham's poems exhibit a kind of distant sensitivity even in autobiography. Long a poet of the disillusioned historical end (as evidenced by her much-anthologized 1987 poem “What the End Is For”), she has freighted it with cryptic memoir and a mythic sense of personal travails (in earlier years the struggles of interpersonal relationships; more recently her health problems). Still, she keeps breaking off in this volume, assuming another direction. Renewed, Graham regathers—like a tornadic storm—the writing surging forward and built out with fragments. “Incarnation” again: “Holding this place in place. Cosmic nihil. Chemsex. Extended / peak. Death in hyperdrive—that shape of yours—we have to / blur it—sand it—pixilate it—rush, froth, dismember.” Here a contemporary form of Dionysian pleasure (“Chemsex”) is presented and then pixilated. A book of interjections, artificial intelligence, and comments-box voices—expansive and open-ended streams of consciousness—*Fast* adds to these an occasional bit of language on loan from political economy: “Taste it, the stagnation.”

Fast's form and idiom rank among its most compelling discoveries. It pushes then switches before trembling with odd, half-forgotten keys and tones derived from high modernism. In Graham's poetry a lyric batters its intelligence of tropes against the machines, making for upswellings of multiplicity in her late work. She seeks, as she once remarked in an interview, “to recompile the oversimplified thing.” Hers is a poetic mode deeply mixed with its time, with what Perry Anderson once called “the irreducible, independent reality of historical evidence.” For Graham, the material reality of that evidence grounds her poetics of change and historical becoming, and as the wreckage quickly grows, so does the rapidity of her montage. “*We must be in / common*. This is our little market. Dark, dark, we are making / our own futures-market, organizing seed, oozy excess, in / thrall, unstoppable, breaking into the sealed-up skin-thing, // minutest interview, burning with love, detained, breath / obtaining, yes abstract but not so much there is no / torture. See. “And grab on, because these poems are aimed at our fast and turbulent present, a time of monsters and improbable developments. Abandoning all comforts, like the ascetic in pursuit of nothingness, Graham's poetry has the force of “→arranged terror→” □

David Lau is a coeditor of *Lana Turner* and the author of the poetry collection *Still Dirty* (Commune Editions, 2016).