

AN INTERVIEW WITH

JORIE GRAHAM

Pulitzer Prize-winner Jorie Graham has been described by the U.S. Poetry Foundation as ‘perhaps the most celebrated poet of the American post-war generation’, and by Peyton Brien in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* as ‘among the most important poets in North American literature today’, for, by her mid-forties, she had ‘already seen more of her work in print and achieved more honors than many poets hope to accomplish in a lifetime.’ It was an enormous pleasure to interview Jorie for *EarthLines* and to engage with her huge warmth, honesty and passion for the world – as well as her commitment never to avoid even the most challenging questions about who and what we are and might become.

Sharon Blackie: *These days you’re often classified as an ‘ecopoet’. Do you feel comfortable with that classification? How do you feel about the term ‘ecopoetry’? Do you think it really does represent new possibilities in poetry, or is it just another term for what we used to call ‘nature poetry’? What challenges do you think ecopoetry faces in the near future?*

Jorie Graham: Well, this is reductive to my poetry – as, first and foremost, I am writing poetry, not doing politics. But it is true that I feel an increasingly activist element associated with the writing of poetry – most especially with the use of the imagination – at this juncture in our history.

At this point there are many – even apparently contradictory – meanings associated with the term. On one end you have, indeed, poets who celebrate, and also grieve, describe, try to render phenomenologically ‘real’, Nature, as we have thought of it, in what one would have to call our ‘traditional’ sense of the planet we share with other species. From Gary Snyder to Wendell Berry to Robert Hass – even Mary Oliver, although I’d say the project is less intellectually fraught for her – you have poets desperately trying to awaken readers to what is actually ‘there’. It is as if – and there are so many reasons for this – we have a new generation that has gone blind to what I call ‘creation’ – without the theological implications of the term.

Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder by Richard Louv argues forcefully the case for what has led to a desperate attempt to combat what our technology and overpopulation have wrought. What neurologists call ‘unstructured outdoor play’ – hide-and-seek, catch – all the play that moves towards dusk, which activates a more ancient part of the brain, a different memory storage and retrieval, a capacity for imagination, intuition and empathy – has almost disappeared from our world. It is so quiet and staggering a loss that the fact that it has gone virtually unnoticed is terrifying. It was standard for me as a child, as for most of us of a certain age, growing up, to play until called in to dinner, for example, or forced in by the advent of absolute dark. Dusk was a thing you felt you could see into and play into until dark blanketed you. This is apparently very important for the formation of

the human brain as we know it. Hiding, seeking, climbing trees, we played.

Such carefree days are gone for America’s youth. Boys and girls now live a ‘denatured childhood’, Louv writes. He cites multiple causes for why children spend less time outdoors and why they have less access to nature: our growing addiction to electronic media, the relinquishment of green spaces to development, parents’ exaggerated fears of natural and human predators, and the threat of lawsuits and vandalism that has prompted community officials to forbid access to their land. Louv links children’s alienation from nature to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, stress, depression and anxiety disorders, not to mention childhood obesity. The replacement of open meadows, woods and wetlands by lawns, golf courses, housing developments, provide little opportunity for exploration, but more importantly, for the development of the capacity for imagination. And we really need to imagine the as-yet-unimaginable racing towards us in order to have a prayer of survival. And right now, the imagination, on that front, shuts down into denial. It has grown weak, and we have a generation or two of humans who cannot see, or feel trust or desire, beyond the world their screen provides.

At the other end of the spectrum – a totally different idea of ecopoetics exists in the thinking of someone like Tim Morton (*Ecology Without Nature*, or *The Ecological Thought*) where he argues against the sense that nature is ‘out there’ and we are ‘in here’ (as in our subjectivity, for example, or our minds and bodies and human consciousness) – but rather, that there is an ‘enmeshment’ of the two to such a degree that he sees the very act of writing ‘about’ nature as a reinforcement of a wrong – and dangerously destructive – misapprehension. To this end he will argue some radical positions which sometimes will go as far as enjoining poets from even writing ‘about’ nature at all – as the very ‘about’ is a source of the problem.

One phrase that struck me – as a way of describing the impulse, at the very level of description – of protecting nature from further colonization and destruction by us – is ‘not to make the invisible visible, but to peruse and multiply the channels of its invisibility’ ~ by Jennifer Scappetone. Jonathan Skinner, founder of *Ecopoetics*, describes his project as ‘Theories exploring the idea that consciousness, and maybe agency, are distributed “out there”, amongst the “objects” of the world, rather than “in here” (tapping skull).’ A principal organization for ecopoetics has been edge effect: the enriched life along an edge between biomes or habitats. These give one a model for poetics or poetries that work in what we might call ‘hybrid’, where the hybridity comes from being in a interstitial zone, an in-between place: for me that would be between consciousness and consciousness of self at the border of its obliteration in *en plein air* objective transcription – something I began in *Never*. At any rate, what these poets tend to be asking is do ‘eco’ and ‘poetics’ interrogate and rethink one another? As Spahr has asked, is it more ecopoetic to write of

the bird or to write of the bulldozer about to destroy the bird's habitat? One envisages some tension between those who would write rainforest or coral reef poems in face of the BP oil disaster, and those who would write oil platform or petroleum poems. *The Ecolanguage Reader* (ed. Brenda Iijima) has some current, edgy examples of writing that in different ways rubs the 'eco' against 'poetics', and vice versa. This is not my way – not even my path – but once you ask me about ecopoetics, I have to account for all its contradictory formulations.

SB: Which other ecopoets or nature writers do you admire, if any, and why?

JG: Well yes; what I listed above is just the tip of the intellectual and emotional set of points of view we are all working from. I am deeply moved by the exchanges between Paul Kingsnorth and Wen Stephenson, which I discovered on your *EarthLines* blog. Deeply. I cannot help but feel I wrote *Sea Change* in Wen's spot, but it seems like I channelled Kingsnorth for the next one, my most recent book, *Place*. I believe, like him, that we are in the Age of Collapse. I also believe the whole machine is at work, and is us. We can no more step out of the machine we made that is ecocide, than we can step out of our own bodies. I just hope he is right that our end will not take with it much more than he thinks: namely, that we fight and cling and destroy until a vast amount of the rest of creation is gone. Some say our oceans are beyond recovery. The dead zones in them are new to the planet since its formation. So we might have done more damage than we know, left debris the effects of which will be in the many hundreds of millions of years unfolding. So I do not know. But I was deeply moved by his honesty. It is very very hard to say what he is saying, as the environmental community itself is its own machine, and coming up against it is hard. It does a great deal of good; it is filled with, as he said, a few thousand individuals really giving their lives for this, so the sense of what James Hansen calls 'game over for the planet' is very hard to take. It is telling you you are wasting your only life.

Part of what no one is willing to talk about is that we know we will not be there for the potentially horrifying lives our offspring will have to face. That is a new feeling, I think, for humans. That it might get better or it might get worse, and you hope for a better future, is an emotional and psychic place from which to die for most people. That it is going to get a lot worse, and that it is going to involve real struggle – famines and mass migrations and wars over scarce resources and probably the breakdown of the social order, possibly things we only think of as 'science fictive', things NASA and our military have thousands of pages on in their files – well, how do you look at your child and then think – what will she do to help her children? How will they live? How to abandon



them to that predicament? It changes one's sense of one's own death. Cormac MacCarthy was after this, I think, up until the last few pages of his book *The Road*. It should have ended when the father died. That's as far as we can imagine. The rest was a feel-good ending, the last few pages where a rescue of some kind is imagined. That's the problem we're in. We need that ending. I am told he added it later. I do not know. It was 'too bleak', so he made a kind of sacred family occur and gave the boy a new home ...

SB: Your poetry has grown more ecological in subject matter over time. What factors have contributed to that – has it followed the pattern of your own personal transformations?

JG: Well, I live on this planet as well as in this world. I have a deep connection – as so many poets do – and they are not all Romantics! – to the sense of being a part of something larger than the human enterprise. I have never been quite persuaded by the – nonetheless sometimes attractive – theories which, often with great philosophical rigour, and even with some regret, feel sure enough to claim we live only in a world of our own construction. Especially linguistic or otherwise mediated construction. I say that this is 'sometimes attractive' because, as I see it, such ways of thinking cut us off from the world, also make us, in an absolute sense, less accountable to it, and, more importantly, for it. If we live in the prison of our days, in that peculiar freedom of the purely human – and many, even great,

poets have – well, at this point in history, as I see it, we had better wake up pretty quickly to the limits – even madness – of such thinking – even if it can be justified through theoretical argument. It makes no difference whether you think you can prove whether the self ‘exists’, whether it truly has ‘agency’, whether it is ‘contingent’ – and upon what. What matters is that for the most part what has brought the world to the brink of potential extinctions – to the surpassing of 350ppm – is what this one species, self or no self, is doing and has done. What right do we have – other than the insufferable rights accorded us by various doctrinaire religions and other delusions of our own invention – to destroy the only habitat of millions of living things, many of them more evolved in ways, and certainly as complex in living-matter, as our one species?

So, yes, I feel this deeply.

If I began to sense it twenty years ago, and it began to creep into my work in *Never*, in a sustained way, it has become the essential way in which I see the history of my moment. The signal catastrophic issue. The

primary responsibility. As an artist, I see some clear work – which Bill McKibben calls for loudly and rightly at this juncture – cut out for us. But maybe we can address that in further detail later on. To answer this question: once I woke up, once I read-up, once I lived outside of the US where the green movements arise out of a very wide swathe of the population – once I lived on agricultural land in France where any farmer was also a committed, informed and active environmentalist – because he saw the bees disappearing and he knew what it meant – because he saw the seasons coming unravelled and he knew why – because he saw birds lose their way in migration and knew why – because he saw his growing season alter, his water disappear, his family come down with environmentally induced cancers – once I watched so many people who live on the land – in Iowa, in Wyoming, in Normandy – tell me ‘It is sick, it is sick, we are killing it’ – I began to read deeply in the field. And I grew very afraid. And what scared me most was the narrowing window of opportunity – the tools at hand, but kept just out of reach by corporate interests and greed, and a population as much lulled into their sleep by (heavily financed) denial as by the very technology that could have awakened them and handed them tools. I saw the failure of courage as a failure of imagination. And that is where art comes in. Or so McKibben thinks, and I agree.

And only certain kinds of uses of Imagination can be called upon now to do some pretty urgent political work. I think film – my beloved medium – is strangely a medium which has deep limitations now, in this respect, because it gives off the sensation – both by its very medium, and by its great tradition of science-fiction accounts of the world – that the very things we need to imagine as most real are thinned by the (subjective) veneer of the ‘science fictive’ which attaches to them. In the movies the world almost ends again and again – and of course it is usually saved by something at the last minute. So not only is that sensation – that it will all be all right in the end somehow – problematic in the way it attaches itself to what we habitually expect from filmic accounts, but, too, there is

the way in which you leave ‘that’ world behind you when the film is done, and you are free to exit it, and re-enter ‘ordinary reality’ – as you walk out of the theatre into the good old ‘ordinary evening’. It has told too many stories that resemble the terrible story we are in. And we have managed to close the movie house door behind us too many times and think, well, that was that, and this is still here. So perhaps, for now, it is almost impossible to make a continuum between the two worlds. Of course some geniuses succeed – Tarkovsky, Bella Tar, for example, are two visionary film-makers who devote their work to this: to the breaking down of these two worlds and the bleeding them into each other. And in their use of the medium the allegory of what we have before us, and what we are in without knowing it, is staggering, and wildly awakening.

The night is never again the same outside when you leave their vision.

But what is being sought by scientists, in artists’ practical use of the Imagination, is how to make the ‘deep future’ – seven to ten generations hence – feel

actually ‘connected’ to us, right down to this very minute of our lives, this choice we make to use this styrofoam cup, this plastic bag... How can you expect a person to find, let alone feel, and act upon, the fine thread that truly connects their very next choice to a life 1,000 years hence which might not in any way resemble what we know of as human life? How do we make sacrifices – ones that will affect our entire way of life in our only life – for those who we do not even know will exist, that they might have a planet still livable, a biome still conducive to human habitation. This is a very hard task indeed. One cannot imagine many requests that have ever been made of the human Imagination that exceed it. So yes, that is what I am thinking about. Not so much when I set out to write a poem, but when I am taking actions and making choices as to how to turn the poem, where to go, within its arc of action. And not consciously. Just as an extension of my practice in my lived life, how I think of myself as a member of my community, a species among species, a constitutive part of larger forces – *creation* is always a good word for it.

SB: *There’s been a lot of discussion about and comment on the form of your work – that it has grown increasingly experimental (and, some might say, less ‘accessible’) – how has this evolved in relation to the content of your poetry? In so many ways the writing is wild, almost ecstatic ... but the radical style seems also somehow to reinforce the human-nonhuman dislocation. Is this intentional or accidental? i.e. do you see the radical forms you employ as a way of moving towards nature in all its inexplicability, or reflecting our dislocation? Do you see your work in opposition to the current alienating facets of our culture, or reflecting them? Can poetry bridge that gap and if so how, and how does it manifest itself in your work?*

JG: I do not see my work as difficult, or even experimental. I think it is pretty straightforward – although, as with any artist’s work, you might need to be acquainted with their body of work to have learned their vocabulary, as it were. Then their utterance is clear. To ‘read’ Dickinson, you have

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to 'speak' Dickinson – which language you learn by having read a great deal of her until her vocabulary is a known thing, her way of proceeding – her oddnesses and leaps – a way of moving you now know. I like that you say the writing is situated at a place where the wild meets the human – in the human, in language – where mindfulness meets non-mind – a great many of these encounters are clearly undertaken in my new book, *Place*. One reviewer put it very well, I think – in a way that makes me think the 'difficulty' factor is waning, as people are learning to read this style – he said I had 'developed a style that is both expansively public and deeply private, solipsistic and encompassing, and always beautifully sensitive to the capacities and failures of language to transform the world'. He also added what I think is a rather brilliant insight – given the double-mindedness one has to live with (deep futurity/the present instant; the fact of oncoming chaos/the beauty or depth of this instant) – that my 'most powerful experience may be ambivalence, as in competing passions, which becomes a startling kind of abundance'.

What amazed me was the example he chose to give for that fact, from a poem in this new book. It is such a good example because it so captures the radical problem I've wrestled with for the past five years – how to live in the full glare of the knowledge science has given us – if we do not put our heads in the sand – and not lose the capacity to simply feel wonder, and take in our life, our present moment, what presence calls the 'beautiful'. I had given myself the spiritual task – after the exhaustions and cryings-out of *Overlord* (which basically was written alongside the torture regime of America at war) and *Sea Change* (which was written after a very deep apprenticeship to the facts and issues involved in climate science) – to 'recover the ability to praise'. That was a tall order, and I did not want it to involve a turning away from the hardest issues at hand. There is no doubt it's a slightly schizophrenic activity. But so is most of life – our body does one thing, our spirit another. So when he quoted the end of a poem in *Place* – 'your blood is full of/barren fields, they are the/future in you you/should learn to feel and/love: there will be no more: no more: not enough to go around: not more around: no more: love that.' – I was just amazed by the word he used to describe that feeling: *abundance*. If we can feel it as *abundance* – the complexity and simultaneity of living for others (the future) and living as one's only self (the present) – then maybe we can find a rudder for the storm.

So no, I do not see – at all – my work (and this would have to be the style and form we are talking about, as the content would not elicit this question) as reflecting the current destructive aspects of our culture – nor the alienating ones. I feel it is trying – if a person reads the poems perhaps suspending the intellect for a minute and letting them in through sound and image – to help the soul, so disorientated, of the reader, find a reorientation. Yes the form is vertiginous, and full of simultaneous looking backwards and leaning forwards – the looking backwards and forwards at once is enforced by the use of the long line and short line – the fault line of the middle making one feel one has to look forward while one is looking back, and vice versa – and yes, we have to learn to be in that complexity and not become terrified, paralysed, or turn away and give up in paralysis. So the very form exercises (I hope) that ability in one to feel many ways, turn multiple ways, at

once. It is first and foremost for myself that this be done, that I learn to be able to do this, as a soul living in this moment. All my craft goes to trying to grow my soul – (as Keats would say, life is the vale of soul-making). Many poems in *Place* – and this is new for me – try to make direct contact with nature ('Earth' for example) in ways that are post-innocence. I feel that the *en plein air* descriptions of *Never*, a book written to deeply make myself see, and thereby to bring into others' vision, the natural world – from its microscopic life to its far reaches of 'evolution' (a word I still used in that book – a number of poems are titled by that term) – are still, in spite of their 'understanding' of the eco issues, *innocent*. I mean by this that I had not fully downloaded it into my soul – and also that I had not yet really gone deeply into the science. *Sea Change* registers that shock. *Place* tries to recover a necessary innocence from which to live and act. A 'higher innocence', to avail myself of Blake's terms. One that follows 'experience'. It is from there that we must act. Or can act. This has nothing to do with explicability or inexplicability. Nature is not in the realm of explication. So I do not engage with it on those terms. I do bring language and mind up against it, into it, I suffuse us with each other – but that is a matter of awakened sensation, and its attendant awakened consciousness. From there too one can, perhaps, act. But surely it is a prerequisite. Nature cannot become an abstraction. That has been the whole deficit in our souls which has brought us to this pass.

SB: *What role, if any, do you think poetry can play in helping people to reconnect with the natural world? I was talking there primarily about readers, but on reflection maybe the more interesting question is how it helps you as a poet to reconnect... Is writing poetry for you an intellectual or a grounding experience? As someone clearly interested in critical theory, do you write from your head or your direct experience of the natural world? So often the two modes of being seem contradictory...*

JG: Well, I am not all that involved, ultimately, with critical theory, to be honest. I have an abiding belief that an untrammled contact point between the mind and nature is possible. I just believe it. I do not feel it can or should be a part of the conversation at this point in our history – our emergency. At over 350 ppm, how do I feel about nature? It is there, I can encounter it, I can lose it. If I can see what I stand to kill off, or lose, it is there enough for me to not dally around wondering if 'contact' is possible. It is possible enough for me to feel near one hundred percent accountability. So, first off, I use my act of attention, of showing-up for sensation, perception – I make sure my body comes into play, that my senses are awake – when I am in the natural world. We all know this is a hard action to undertake – that it takes effort to be 'present' and that presence is required, in both an intellectual and spiritual and sensorial sense, for any action to result from our encounter. The world is there to me because I am an incarnate piece of it. I do not feel I need to 'reconnect', I do not feel the divorce to be real. It is a divorce which most of our way of living – our technology, our desire for what we call 'individual freedom' – does its all to enforce. There is much control to be gained if one has humans who are cut off from their wellspring: they are endlessly more manipulable; commodity capitalism thrives on them. There

is much to be gained as well if one has rendered humans capable of an absence of empathy, and a willingness to look the other way – heart, mind and soul – while their only home is robbed by corporate interests. So why do I write poems about this instead of, say, essays? Because poetry permits me to do justice to the complicated emotion of recognising that I am myself part of the larger problem – as Yeats says, we make poetry out of the quarrel with ourselves. In addition, as you intuited, the practice of writing poetry is my essential way to keeping myself connected, or of bringing myself back into presence when I have dispersed into estrangement. Like everyone else in our culture my senses are often ready to shut down altogether.

Not-feeling is easier than feeling the loss of a loved one. It is a natural human reflex to leave a loved one before they leave you. Just to maintain power. So our turning-away has some of that in it. Every act of writing – every stage of it – is a practice to overcome the very impulse in myself, which is in everyone, to turn away. And yet, even in presence, as I said above, there has to be contradiction – paradox – doublemindedness – or one is oversimplifying.

I am biased of course, but I find poetry singularly equipped to do this task so well. Music, for all its extraordinary powers, has to contend with genuine extended duration. A lyric moment can be stretched, expanded, but it is not a narrative, not an epic, it takes place in what one imagines to be ‘an instant in time’ – ‘a moment’s thought’, as Yeats would have it. Music develops and there is room for the intensity of paradox to unfold into a this and a that. For me some, great, painting really can do this. Matisse. Cezanne. Some Caravaggio. It’s rare. Some Bacon. Some, very few, Rothkos – really only one I can think of... At any rate, each art form has its unique work to do, and this is what I love most about my medium.

SB: *Are you engaging in activism through your poetry? Or is it incidental? If not, what are you trying to do? To highlight or raise awareness about what may soon be lost to us? Or is as simple as that you are writing the poetry you need to write, and anything more is very fine but incidental?*

JG: I do feel that one aspect of my poetry is a form of activism, yes. The activism has to do with those uses of the imagination I have been describing. The subject matter is not so much the issue as the way of engaging the reader, for example, or introducing acts of feeling that require one to posit a deeper futurity than the one to which one is accustomed. Sometimes readers, more often in the US than abroad, react to ‘subject matter’ over the actual activity of the poem. They

feel anything remotely ‘political’ to be polemical and thus didactic. They feel they ‘know this information already, so why do they need it in a poem’. That is precisely the point. They ‘know’ it. They are not ‘feeling it’. That is what activists in the environmental movement are asking of us: help it be felt, help it be imagined. That’s what I have talked about as ‘imagining the unimaginable’. I must emphasize, though, that this is only one aspect of, say, poems such as those in *Sea Change*, which are also involved with many other things poems try to do. But yes, one aspect is indeed activist. And that aspect is sometimes resisted, by the very people one would want to reach, as mere ‘information’. It is strange to me that

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this problem is so rarely the case when my work appears in translation. Spain, Germany, Italy, Poland – this seems like a natural part of poetry’s task to them, and it excites them that many of us are undertaking it. But in the US readership there is sometimes some resistance. Sometimes it feels like this cannot be unrelated to America’s refusal to sign on to so many crucial international treaties. Or their being the hugest consumers (per capita) of non-renewable resources. And so on. So often,

they do not want to hear any bad news. And some readers of poetry are no exception. So no, there is nothing incidental about my bringing the Iraq War or climate science into the body of the experience of the poem. I think it has the power to affect minds. It is a slow activity. It takes a long time for a book of poems to really reach its audience.

SB: *I’ve read that for a long time you and your family spent summers on a ranch in Wyoming. Was that a simpler way of living? What was it like for you to live simply, in the wilderness? What did you learn from the experience? How did that experience translate into your poetry?*

JG: Well, yes. The best description of that way of life is in my ex-husband James Galvin’s book on our homestead – *The Meadow*. And yes, it was very basic – split wood in the morning, start up a fire in the woodstove, wait forty-five minutes for it to boil, make coffee. It was years before Jim got us running water – so we carried water from the nearby spring. We had an outhouse. When Jim built the house, from ninety-nine trees, I think, he slowly made it such that we could take real baths, with a tiny woodheater for water. The arrival of a tub was a miracle. Town was far enough away over the prairie that we went about once a week to stock up, sometimes less often. Town day was a big deal. No mail to speak of except once a week. Before computers. Before cell phones. Really cut off, so really clued in. For about sixteen

years for me, four to five months a year. He still goes there now in the summers. No neighbors for miles for years ... We put in a garden. We jar-canned. It was not 'back' to anything, it was where the place really was. Going on a walk was also going arrow-head hunting, checking on the cattle.

I wrote many books there – it was a deeply formative and essential part of my life. I raised my daughter there, in summers, in solitude, with Jim. I made her stuffed animals and we baked bread and learned about the 'wild'. We lived in the homesteader's house – so no one but that man and us had ever lived in that land, as native Americans had only summered there – it was at 9000 feet, so they did not winter there. I learned there is no such thing as the wild. It is the bedrock reality. It is. We called it *wild*, because we think that's what it is in relation to us. In relation to it we are the wild ones ... wild, dumb, unsubtle, barbaric even. I tested every line I wrote against that sense of 'geologic' time I lived in. It makes you very small. There's a lot of silence and not much speech around you. So you feel you'd better make the speech count. I had grown up in Rome, so my 'long reaches' of time were historical – all continuously inhabited, all part of human culture. Here was a place where the millions of years were the present tense you lived in, this was planet-time. It made an individual life small enough – the right smallness – as historical time did – but in a very different way. There was no psychology anywhere in the texture of that reality. There was no sympathy. There was survival and there was the hum of deep time and the sense that survival was ensured if you just left everything alone to do what it was meant, in the scheme of things, to do.

Everywhere people went they wrecked it. That was clear as day to me then, as most parts of that landscape were unpeopled and began to be peopled as we lived there. I cannot exclude us, though we tried to live as if we were in the pre-industrial age. People were clearly not meant to live as they wished to live on the planet, as I could see it. The mismatch between this species – with its needs and desires – and this place was evident everywhere... Native Americans, in their early history, knew how to live on land. But we took care of that. Oh it made me and makes me half-crazed at times with grief, then with rage, then with just total bafflement. Most of my poetry has spent its time trying to figure out what 'being' is – human 'being' and non-human 'being'. How do they go together. Can they. What on earth is human desire. I knew even then desire was our illness, as well as our stunning spark. It has turned out to be more our illness. Our terminal illness. What can I say. That is what I write from and about.

SB: *How (if you do) do you keep yourself connected with the natural world from day to day?*

JG: I use poetry – but not only poetry – to try to practice 'presence'. I spend a great deal of my time teaching, and what I teach are various ways, through reading, to 'show up with your body' for experience. To actually feel yourself use your senses. I find we are in a world where most people are invited to not use most of their sensorium. There are many reasons for this – it is easier to not feel pain, accountability, grief, loss, all the emotions that come from losing your mate (the earth), losing your way of life (your sense of ethical reality),

losing your home and other-species-family – and healthy land, air, water. If your body shuts down, you kind of don't really feel them to be 'there' as much – and lord knows the virtual technologies assist in every way such a shutdown of the actual.

SB: *In the New York Times James Longenbach said that you think of the poet 'not as a recorder but as a constructor of experience'. I'm very interested in that idea. Can you expand?*

JG: It's a rather simple idea, actually. As I would put it, you are not the narrator but the protagonist of your poem. You undergo it. It is an encounter with the so-called subject – I prefer Stevens' word 'occasion'. So, even if the materials of the poem are already-known materials – memory, a story you wish to tell which has occurred to you in its entirety, an idea you have in mind (I'd say don't start there!), a landscape you think you know – you still have to use the tools of poetry to have an encounter with the material. Whatever it is you think you know, the whole purpose of the tools of the poem, of 'technique', the essence of its activity and desire, is to find out what there is in experience that the sheer living of it, however brutal and profound, your whole being might have 'missed'. There is more in experience than 'experience' gives us. So to *record* that is to me, well, not getting what I go to poetry for: a possibility of encountering a reality which is more paradoxical, or contradictory, or complex or simply surprising than I thought I had gleaned through 'mere' experience or thought.

SB: *And finally ... will your most recent volume of poetry, Place, be classified as ecopoetry? Can you tell us something about that?*

JG: Oh, I cannot answer that! I am too close to it. I think it is my best work – it took me a very long time to make – but what poet doesn't think that! My primary impulse was all I have spoken of in this interview – the desire to not shut my eyes and yet to still recover the ability, in this full knowledge of potential coming 'collapse', to praise the world I love. But out of presence, not out of denial. Someone will just have to read it to see if I managed it! We must not lose the ability to praise.

Jorie Graham was born in New York City in 1950, the daughter of a journalist and a sculptor. She was raised in Rome, Italy and educated in French schools. She studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris before attending New York University as an undergraduate, where she studied filmmaking. She received an MFA in poetry from the University of Iowa. Graham is the author of numerous collections of poetry, most recently *Place* (Ecco, 2012), *Sea Change* (Ecco, 2008), *Never* (2002), *Swarm* (2000), and *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974-1994*, which won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry. Graham has also edited two anthologies, *Earth Took of Earth: 100 Great Poems of the English Language* (1996) and *The Best American Poetry 1990*. Her many honors include a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship and the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. She has taught at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and is currently the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University. She served as a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets from 1997 to 2003.