

American Poet Jorie Graham

Hero of Both the Mind and Spirit

By Rachel Sobers

Renowned American poet Jorie Graham mingles philosophical discourse with the artistry of verse, speaking from a place foreign to the world yet familiar to the individual. For multiple decades, Graham has been praised for her abstract transformations of the ordinary and usage of unconventional craftsmanship. Her work is known to transcend the pages on which it has been written and take on a persona of its own — one that questions, argues, and ventures to the very edge of the human experience. In her writing on many social themes and issues, Graham admits that her style of writing presents, in itself, a particular thematic conception of the natural world. A detached perspective on time runs through each of her pieces, stringing them together along a singular path into the human heart. Most profoundly, Graham discusses the properties of time and the extent to which they limit humanity; by stepping away from the present, Graham identifies the role of the individual within various societies and environments. In both her words and the spaces between them, Jorie Graham renders the relationship between time and person, ultimately exploring time's nature as being both momentary and infinite.

Graham has long been surrounded by art and intellectualism, which has allowed her to develop both a

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personal voice and the confidence to create with it. In 1950, Graham was born in New York City to her mother, a sculptor, and her father, a journalist (Edemariam). In an interview with *The Guardian*, she recalls “painters, film-makers, war photographers, novelists, socialites, philosophers, politicians, rock stars, prelates, starlets – the whole mess of it” floating through her house (Edemariam). Even as a child, Graham was thoroughly exposed to the power of perspective and the magic of creation, and she was encouraged to thoughtfully nurture her own unique light.

Graham’s education significantly contributed to her growth as a writer and thinker, allowing her to develop a multifaceted range of work. Graham spent most of her childhood years in Rome, Italy, though she was primarily educated in French schools. It was in Europe that Graham was introduced to poetry, and she remembers being surrounded by “cultures where a massive amount of poetry is read by a lot of the population” (Edemariam). Consequently, while in Europe, her curriculum was largely centered upon reading and writing, and she gained experience analyzing and appreciating the art of poetry (Edemariam). Graham discovered her natural aptitude for contemplation, and she resolved to spend her young adulthood studying philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris. Shortly after her time in Paris, she attended New York University as an undergraduate, where she devoted herself to filmmaking (Edemariam). The narrative art of film led her to further explore the written word until she radically fell in love with it; in 1978, Graham received her Master of Fine Arts degree in Poetry at the University of Iowa (Radsken). Graham, though young, had already become a thoroughly educated historian, writer, and thinker.

Graham has received numerous highly acclaimed honors, reinforcing her reputation as a well-trained and insightful poet. Graham has received the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship, an Ingram Merrill Fellowship, the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, the Whiting Award, and the Pulitzer Prize (“Jorie Graham”). Each of these awards promotes a unique cause, with many including diversity, justice, and peace. Graham's accolades make clear that she does not write from a singular point of view; rather, she boasts the unique capacity to see the entirety of the world's vast spectrum of colors, promises, and secrets.

Though Graham's artistic career began rather early, she, now 73, continues to explore the current social climate of the United States. Graham has spoken to the impending threats of climate change in many of her works, including “Poem” and “The Visible World,” and she has long been sensitive to the changes that our world faces as it thrusts itself into the future. In her recent collection, *To 2040*, Graham discusses the world's growing prioritization of technology and diminishment of environmental consciousness, portraying these two phenomena as being parallel to one another (Radsken). In this collection, she investigates the ethical permissibility of artificial intelligence and its potential impact on the human race. Further, she criticizes the “capitalism nightmare” that is the American ideal, and she questions the truth that it claims to point society toward (Radksen). Graham does not claim to be either wholly political or apolitical as a writer, though she believes art to be a medium for accessing the “collective subjectivity” of human beings (Waldman). She has confessed that each of her poems is a “reckon[ing] with humanity,” an immersive experience that only the humanities have the power

to create (Radsken). Her work does not unduly amplify political discourse, creating a dramatic, distorted illustration of reality. Instead, Graham's work is, in her own words, a project to make "life as complex as it needs to be again" (Edemariam). Rather than appealing to journalistic renderings of the truth, she ventures to the deepest pockets of the human mind by hinting at existential questions.

Graham's work is an effort to dissect the relationship between the material and the immaterial. In Paul Jenkins's 1987 journal article for the *Massachusetts Review* entitled "American Poetry," he refers to Graham's collection *The End of Beauty* as an adequate encapsulation of the "struggle between the impulse that yearns to contain...and another impulse that wants to escape (to "dissolve" or "erase," to remain unshaped potential, to free the immaterial from its sheath of matter)" (Jenkins 101). The central question of Graham's work exists in the metaphysical; Graham herself admits that the subjects of her works do not take place in reality, but rather in transcendent truths. She writes of humanity as an experience rather than a machine, attempting to capture the parts of life that cannot be explained by logic. Thus, according to Jenkins, her work is a conflict between humans' simultaneous desires for containment and escape: two forces that, though invisible, constitute the very essence of being (Jenkins 102). Graham investigates the way in which individuality may fit comfortably into a prefabricated universe, hoping to discover the meaning of life outside of the scope of time. Conflicts between time and person are phenomena that Graham thereby bravely dares to describe on behalf of all breathing, loving, and believing beings. Graham's words delve into the complex association between individual and circumstance, ultimately coming together in an effort to describe the indescribable.

Because the plane from which Graham writes exists in a place above the natural world, her work is riddled with different thematic conceptions of time and its limitations. According to critic Adam Kirsch, Graham has earned a reputation for writing difficult, “unintelligible” poetry, “deliberately intended to frustrate the reader” (Edemariam). However, Graham urges that the objective of her shifting perspectives and complex metaphors is not to create a palatable representation of reality; rather, its very purpose is to cause such tension between the reader and his own mind. Most intimately, Graham discusses the boundaries created by time, and she explains her work as an effort to capture the “strangely sturdy illusion” that is time itself (Radsken). In this way, she depicts time’s nature as being paradoxical, as it is, simultaneously, both vague and permanent. In an interview with Literary Hub, Graham herself describes her poetry as a means of questioning how the human race might “anchor [itself] in any reality” when it exists “between these apparently contradictory truths” (Mishler). Her work does not adhere to any consistent pattern of speech or perspective; it instead both lyrically and structurally represents time’s dual nature. In her various analyses of time, Graham explores the ways in which one might rip through time’s fabric and access the part of the mind hidden beneath its surface.

Using the relationship between time and person as a larger thematic lens, Graham more specifically explores time within the themes of death and permanence. With respect to death, she describes the way in which time tightens to reveal one’s “singular selfhood” in the moment of a fatal diagnosis or devastating accident (Mishler). She implies that time is, generally, vast and unseen until the disastrous moments in which it makes itself apparent; what was once invisible

suddenly becomes thick and suffocating. On another front, Graham often describes time's ability to restrict space and movement. In her collection *The End of Beauty*, Graham explores nature's limitations, taking care to investigate "the moment when the mind realizes it's not yet able to shape, and thus is forcibly awakened to, the larger world surrounding it" (Gardner). In many of her works, Graham struggles against the boundaries of space while, at the same time, praising their power to unify and stabilize. Moreover, Graham's work in *The End of Beauty* also reveals her unique understanding of art's permanence; she believes that the unique worlds created by works of art constitute a much "realer" reality than the natural world (Howley 4). Her collection is an effort to allow subjects of art and beauty to speak for themselves as they take shape along the brief path between their creator's mind and full fruition (Gardner). In an earlier collection, *Never*, Graham investigates the world's necessity for continuous change against the permanence of life's most fundamental questions (Gardner). With each piece, she aligns her discussion with the current social and political scenes of the United States, ultimately crafting a lamentary ballad for the country's most continuously pressing socioeconomic controversies (Radsken). Using time as a vehicle, Graham transports the themes of death, boundaries, and permanence into a new realm of contemplation.

Graham's "The Mask Now" is an elegy to her late father and his slow-burning death, though the speaker demonstrates a sense of urgency through her repetition, diction, and imagery; ultimately, the speaker's unique experience reveals the contrast between subjective time and the idle motion of the universe. As the speaker's father's health deteriorates throughout the poem's first stanzas, he repetitively cries with small breaths of anguish and defeat, "mask now," referring to his red sleeping mask

(Graham, "The Mask Now" line 31). The repetition of his cry allows his demand to serve as a refrain. Even as time glides onward and her father's health slowly declines, the speaker is anchored back to a singular, poignant state of grief each time her father cries out for his sleeping mask. Thus, though the time generally continues to progress gently, she remains ever-receptive to his pitiful cries for comfort. Because his wails penetrate each paragraph with the same sudden, jolting sense of disappointment, it is evident that the speaker views them with the same sense of immediacy even as circumstances change. Furthermore, after her father's death, the speaker herself puts on the mask, and she confesses that, though her "periphery disappears, [she] can still feel it, our knowing what's coming, a thicket we got lost in - till the only thing is now" (Graham, "The Mask Now" lines 47-48). The speaker's choice of the pronoun "it," diction that connotes avoidance and hesitation, to describe her impending grief again demonstrates her unfettered focus on the immediate. Because the speaker does not refer to her coming grief by name, she suggests that she refuses to face it directly; rather than acknowledging grief's existence, she maintains a level of distance between herself and the passage of time that will bring it forth to her. Further, she affirms her lack of flexibility to time's demands by referring to the future as a "thicket." The imagery of a thicket, dense and indiscernible, reveals the apprehension with which she resigns herself to what the future holds. Though she can identify its shape, the array of emotions that it will present to her remains incomprehensible. The speaker attempts, with the wearing of her father's mask, to remain in the present, though she senses the constant motion of the world around her.

In a podcast covering Graham's "The Mask Now," editors at the Poetry Foundation discuss the significance of the

speaker's wearing of her late father's sleeping mask. The editors affirm that the speaker's choice to put on the mask is a "temporal thing," a gesture to anchor her father in a space that exists outside of time (James and Juyoung 8:05). Because she can no longer access him in the natural world, time's progression becomes both useless and unintelligible to the speaker. Moreover, the editors agree that "the power of objects in this poem is so incredible...the way that the mask and these other objects take the speaker back and forth in time" (James and Juyoung 8:24). Because the speaker oscillates between past and present, she is no longer adhering to natural laws of space and time. Rather, her conception of time is her own—one that allows her to remember her father in the most authentic way. The editors urge that "the sleep mask allows a sort of darkness for the visible world but a new sort of feeling for the visible world in that darkness" (James and Juyoung 12:27). The feeling created within that darkness belongs to the speaker herself; it is a darkness characterized by her own memory of her father and his passing. Her emotional state while under the mask is far from the incoming thicket of grief laid before her, for it exists within the deepest crevices of her own heart.

Furthermore, in her poem "To a Friend Going Blind," Graham uses imagery and diction to honor the boundaries imposed by time, praising them for the structure that they offer to a world of ambiguity. The poem is a conversation between the speaker and a friend, a seamstress who is losing her sight, regarding a fragment of sewing cloth. The speaker, completely enthralled by the fabric's beauty, admires its "texture, grain, the built-in limits" (Graham, "To a Friend Going Blind" lines 13-14). The imagery of the cloth, thick with its own terrain and bound by definitive edges, serves as a representation of the earth; the world is similarly a small plane of different textures

and stories whose edges are explicitly determined by the forces of space and time. The romanticization of the fabric translates to an interpretation of beauty, grace, and honor with respect to the natural world. Though the fabric of time is limited, it contains much wonder, promise, and life to explore.

As the speaker continues to expound upon her comparison between the fragment of fabric and the living world, she begins to identify the beauty in limitation itself. The speaker stresses to her companion that the earth's "walls are beautiful" and that "it feels rich to be in their grasp" (Graham, "To a Friend Going Blind" lines 32-24). The word "rich," diction that connotes fervent approval, suggests a sense of fulfillment, implying that the world's very limitations give it life; the speaker's diction unifies the concepts of comfort and confinement, for the word "rich" describes the world's boundaries as, unexpectedly, containing possibility. According to Susan Angebrannndt of the Green Chair Press, "Jorie Graham's poem "To a Friend Going Blind" is about life's boundaries...most of us think of boundaries as limitations, but they also give life its shape" (Angebrannndt). Angebrannndt affirms the relationship between boundaries and a sense of security by hinting at the shapelessness that life would take on without the time's constancy. Thus, it is the world's very limitations that nurture its inhabitants to grow and explore their own unique purposes.

In the poem's final lines, the speaker proclaims that to fully surrender to time is to recognize the beauty in its ability to limit. As the scraps of unrefined fabric transform into a dress, the blind seamstress dresses herself in it. Marveling at the dress's design, the speaker describes the garment as being "the shape of what has come to rescue her" (Graham, "To a Friend Going Blind" lines 36-37). The gentle, dignified imagery of the

blind woman dressing herself in the fabric of time represents her capitulation to the world's boundaries. It is a gesture of surrender, an acquiescence to the inevitable limitations of time and space. Furthermore, the speaker's choice of diction in the word "rescue" implies that time's unequivocal nature supplies stability to the blind woman. Even as her own autonomy deteriorates, she finds refuge in the world's immutable design. Critic Thomas Gardner describes the woman's wearing of the dress to be "a pursuit of timelessness through the immersion of the body" (Gardner 27). Here, he discusses the sensation of physical safety and its connection to the internal rescuing of oneself. In surrendering herself to time's universal limitations, the blind woman, paradoxically, achieves a personal timelessness; she is free in the truest sense. Ultimately, time provides the world with the structure that allows its members to open themselves, learn, and experience uninhibitedly.

Finally, in Graham's "Mother's Hands Drawing Me," she uses diction, imagery, and syntax to portray art's permanence, thereby describing her artist mother's belief in art's supremacy over nature. The poem begins as a description of the speaker's mother drawing the speaker, and the speaker refers to herself as "dying / only [her] mother's hands continue undying" (Graham, "Mother's Hands Drawing Me" lines 1-2). The speaker's choice of diction in both the words "dying" and "undying" suggests a disjunction between the nouns that they each describe. Because these adjectives are, by the distinction of a prefix, inherently in opposition to one another, the reader is led to assume a sense of tension between the words that they each modify. Thus, immediately established is a complex relationship between the speaker herself and her mother's hand; as her mother's hand continues drawing a stylized version of her daughter, the speaker's true, substantive being

withers away. Andrew Osborn of the Chicago Review describes the apparent conflict between the forces of reality and imagination as an appropriate representation of Graham's "disoriented yet persistently creative mother" (Osborn). For this reason, he describes the poem as a "tender tribute" rather than an "inadequately curated stream of consciousness." Between the speaker's words exists a description of her mother's preference for a world defined by artistry over an objective reality. Art, to her, is not a means of passively expressing a talent; rather, it is an obligation to create a world of her own.

Further, the speaker superimposes imagery of time passing with imagery of her mother's artistic process, ultimately demonstrating the timelessness of her mother's work:

 this second this million
 years where I watch as each thing is
 seen and canceled-out and re-
Produced (Graham, "Mother's Hands Drawing Me" lines
47-49)

The imagery of time passing through "million[s] of years" is accompanied by the imagery of the speaker's mother hatching and re-hatching her drawing. The layering of these images over one another ascribes time's boundlessness to the mother's artistic process; time's limitlessness is laid adjacent to creation of artwork, thereby attributing to the artwork a sort of permanence. According to critic Paul Jenkins in an analysis of Graham's larger career of work, "the struggle between form and freedom is most frequently expressed here in language that belongs to painters, or to lovers, or to literary theorists" (Jenkins 102). In "My Mother's Hands Drawing Me," Graham's speaker discusses her mother's experience through this

struggle. The speaker's mother is a living embodiment of the tension between the natural world and artistic freedom. Thus, her process of creation is portrayed to be, in her mind, infinite: exceeding all boundaries of space and time and determining for itself new horizons.

Jorie Graham has earned a reputation for being both a writer and a philosopher, for she uses her poetry as a means of accessing truths that lay far above the natural world. Having been nurtured as an artist since her youth, Graham has grown to view the world through a uniquely perceptive lens. Thus, because of her naturally contemplative disposition, she is unafraid to test society's boundaries and speak to the world's unanswered questions. Many of Graham's works center upon the theme of time and culminate in discussions of its nature as being both momentary and infinite. Through exploring time's paradoxical nature, she dissects various situations in which time molds itself to the impulses of the individual. Ultimately, Graham's work is a testament to the unseen; her words find form in formlessness, time in timelessness, and truth in the very absence of truth.

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