

# TO HOLD THE WIND



*Christopher Miller*

JORIE GRAHAM, *The Errancy*. Carcanet, £9.95

Jorie Graham's latest collection of poems, *The Errancy*, takes its title from the archetypal knight's quest, the pathless journey whose hazards Edmund Spenser underscored in his latinate pun on "error", from *errare*, to wander. Among the heroic wanderers of Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, it is perhaps Britomart who most resembles Graham's lyric speakers, because her search for her future mate begins with a gaze into an enchanted glass that becomes internalized as a visceral pang. For Graham, too, the visual is intensely physical: looking at (or rather *into*) the world causes a palpable ache, and her gazes are made of filaments, scribbles, stitches, folds, trelises. As in Spenserian narrative, Graham's restless trajectory amid phenomena is always felt to diverge from the true course of desire.

But if Britomart's quest for the real knight to match the ideal image in Merlin's mirror might be called Platonic, Graham's acts of descriptive engagement with the world can be appropriately termed Aristotelian, as the title of her last collection, *Materialism* (1995), would suggest. In an exemplary lyric of that book, "Young Maples in the Wind", the poet restlessly tries to render the flickering incandescence of rain-dampened leaves in sun and breeze. Her effort transcends the conventionally descriptive, however, in the sinuous overlap of the tangible and the abstract ("ripped, fingery serration / diagramming in barbarous brilliance the juncture of / presence to / absence"); the concern with the elusiveness of the natural world ("where is your inventory of / events?"); and the insistent ethical contact with her audience ("Reader, / wind blowing through these lines I wish were branches, / searching in daylight, trying as I / am trying / to find a filament of the real...").

The tree in a wind, which has an almost totemic significance in Graham's visual lexicon, reappears several times in *The Errancy*, whose fragmentary epigraph, from Sir Thomas Wyatt, recalls the "green netting set forth" in "Young Maples": "Since in a net I seek to hold the wind". As symbol, it might be compared with the aeolian harp of Romantic mythol-

ogy, which Graham briefly alludes to in one poem. Coleridge imagined the wind-driven lyre as a mind inspired by its environment, “one vast intellectual breeze”; but Graham, less insistent on universals, associates the wind with a maddeningly intangible flux, the “manyness” that the mind constantly tries to arrange. And in brief moments of aesthetic calm the mind succeeds, as when thrashing willow branches harmonize into oars “thrumming in / unison into / the open sea of my watching”. Like Wallace Stevens, Graham is signally concerned with arrangement, and in “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia”, which begins *The Errancy*, she seems to revisit the floral centerpiece of Stevens’s “The Poems of Our Climate” from which “the never-resting mind” would always escape. We find the title figure of the poem, one of several seraphic personae in the book, sequestered on the upper floor of a house, endlessly arranging flowers while a party goes on downstairs. In this liminal allegory, upper and lower floors might correspond to artist and society, or perhaps, in a spatialization of the self, to the freedom of imagination and the constraints of social existence. In either case, the angel represents a hauntingly urgent voice of mediation between realms:

and you feel the calligraphic in you reach out like a soul  
into the midst of others, in conversation,  
gloved by desire, into the tiny carnage of  
opinions....So dizzy. Life buzzing beneath me  
though my feeling says the hive is gone, queen gone,  
the continuum continuing beneath, busy, earnest, in con-  
versation.

The “little utopia” suggests, among other things, a dream of the greater possibilities of language—transformed from the lacerating “whips of syntax in the air” at the party to “calligraphic” utterances, like banderoles unfurled from the mouths of angels in mediaeval painting. In the passage above, “conversation” appears twice, the second time fractured by a line-break in typographical intimation of its better self, verse—etymologically, a *turning* from one line to the next. Graham’s poetry itself is fraught with turns—skeptical, self-doubting, exuberant, tentative—accentuated by her familiar indentations and Dickinsonian dashes. At the end of this guardian angel’s floral visions and revisions, the poem makes a final turn toward the window-pane of self, to contemplate a world of larger forces of arrangement, beyond anyone’s control: “Let us look out again. The yellow sky. / With black leaves rearranging it...”.

In a volume full of thematic echoes, the final poem, “Of the Ever-Changing Agitation in the Air”, revisits the concerns of the first, invoking

the “liberty” of the little upstairs utopia. Here, the aerial stirrings are not the wind but rather the improvisations of a man dancing down the street in a “little city” to the inward lyric pulse of a “nervous little theme pushing itself along, / braiding, rehearsing, / constantly incomplete so turning and tacking”. An intermediary between the guardian angel’s deliberate arrangements and the world’s fortuitous happenings, the figure reminds us of Yeats’s “body swayed to music”, and the organic inseparability of dancer and dance; but in a characteristically enigmatic twist, Graham ends the poem with a perspectival shift, a movement away from sheer celebration:

*liberty* spooling in the evening air,  
 into which the lilacs open, the skirts uplift,  
 liberty and the blood-eye careening gently over the giant  
 earth,  
 and the cat in the doorway who does not mistake the world,  
 eyeing the spots where the birds must eventually land—

Call the cat, amid ever-changing agitations, the Guardian Angel of Inevitability, or perhaps the Little Sphinx of Closure. It is an intent observer who knows that you can set your foot in the same spot in the Heraclitean stream of events only once, that what Graham elsewhere calls the “busyness” of the world is “the sum of what *takes place*”—in one place rather than another. In a poem simply called “Thinking”, Graham assumes the tensed, vigilant position of the cat, now observing a crow—a “hive of black balance”—perched precariously on a telephone line. In this vividly materialized moment of looking, in which eye and coal-black object are fused in a “cindering at the glance-core”, Graham is waiting to see what the crow, amid “this maximum habitat—freedom”, will do next. Eventually, it takes flight, first falling and then rising in a temporal event that Graham characteristically bodies forth as palpable, three-dimensional thing:

...gravity winnowed, the falling raggedly  
 reversed, depth suddenly pursued, its invisibility ridged—bless  
 him—  
 until he is off, hinge by hinge, built of tiny wingtucks, filaments  
 of flapped-back wind, until the thing (along whose spine  
 his sentence of black talk, thrashing, wrinkling, dissipates—the  
 history,  
     the wiring,  
 shaking, with light—) is born.

With the references to ragged reversal and the “sentence”, we might easily imagine this to be an allegory of poetic creation, or perhaps of the genesis of an idea. But the crow is too insistently perceived to be subordinated to symbolic apparatus. Watching it, in other words, is not *like* thought; it is a form of thought. The first sentence of the poem is a blind-spot in consciousness to be filled in with the act of creative recovery to follow: “I can’t really remember now”.

We might say that Graham is concerned with the pressure of the future, but such a paraphrase only partially renders the effect of these lines of longing and regret in “The Guardian Angel of the Private Life”: “the heart trying to make time and place seem small, / sliding its slim tears into the deep wallet of each new event / on the list / then checking it off—oh the satisfaction—each check a small kiss, / an echo of the previous one...”. Here as elsewhere, Graham is a poet of participial ongoingness; but against these present-tense verbal inventories, she contrapuntally introduces a voice of interjection—“oh the satisfaction”. Graham has borrowed the syllable of traditional odal utterance and made it her own; it is the sound of moral seriousness, of urgency, without a trace of undercutting irony. Though Graham often resists formal closure in her poems—or thematizes her resistance—the end of this poem, with its final exclamation, feels exactly right, as if the last “oh” were wrung from the angel’s description of mortals’ anticipatory existence: “before the credo, before the plan—right at the homesickness—before this list you hold / in your exhausted hand. Oh put it down.”

Graham, who finds many ways of materializing time in these poems, finds one of her most haunting symbolic objects in the titular overcoat of “Le Manteau de Pascal”, in which the French philosopher was buried, along with a paper containing “irrefutable proof of the existence of God” sewn up in its folds. In Graham’s imagination, the coat becomes anyone’s coat, and her fugal interplay of voices makes it a container of time past and future:

I have a coat I am wearing I was told to wear it.  
Someone knelt down each morning to button it up.  
I looked at their face, down low, near me.  
What is *longing*? what is a *star*?  
Watched each button a peapod getting tucked back in.  
Watched harm with its planeload folded up in the sleeves.

In this arresting sequence, we hear the run-on, flat declaratives of a child, the recollections of the adult, and the naive questions of both. We might assume that the adult asks about longing and the child asks about the star,

but it is of course impossible to tell; both questions are secular aspects of the one big question Pascal thought he had answered. The final two sentences in this passage, with their figurative language, more explicitly suggest a poet's perspective; but within these lines, the descriptive idiom turns from the tenderly diminutive ("each button a peapod") to the jarringly lethal ("harm with its planeload"). And what might have partaken of any time, Pascal's or ours, turns irrevocably to the modern.

*The Errancy* is made of such thrilling, often difficult, perspectival turns—evocations of the feel of living in time, and of the insatiable curiosity of transcending it. Many of these poems might have sprung from the implications of Stevens' memorable tercet from *The Rock*: "It is an illusion we were ever alive, / Lived in the houses of mothers, arranged ourselves / By our own motions in a freedom of air". Stevens wrote these heartbreakingly alienated lines at the end of his life; Graham, in the middle of her career, gives us existence as simultaneously illusive and tangible in her own vocabulary of arrangement and freedom, net and wind.