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## A Poetry Reading

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*University of Iowa*

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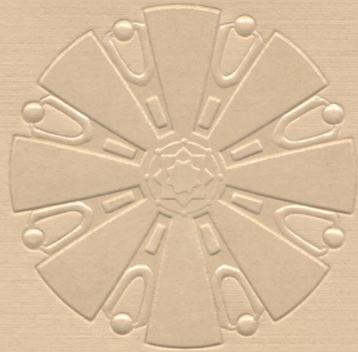
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A Poetry Reading

Jorie Graham



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LECTURE  
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The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

# A Poetry Reading

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*Through the generosity of donors of unrestricted gifts to the University of Iowa Foundation, the Presidential Lecture series provides an opportunity for distinguished members of the faculty to present significant aspects of their work to members of the University community and to the general public. The University has established this annual series to encourage intellectual communication among the many disciplines that constitute the University of Iowa, and to provide a public forum for University scholarship, research, and creative achievement.*

# A Poetry Reading

Jorie Graham

(Opening remarks, February 3, 1991)

## FRIENDLY FIRE

### 1.

How many miles to Babylon?  
Three score miles and ten.  
Can I get there by candlelight?  
Yes, and back again!  
If your heels are nimble and light,  
You may get there by candlelight.

There's the Babylon of exile where we cry beside the Euphrates through the eyes of the Hebrew poet. There's Babylon as the idea of the City itself—the Great City—that constructed constructing thing that finds its face in Augustine's City of God, in Nebuchadnezzar's City, in the brilliant city the airplane reveals way below us like a vast computer, in the fierce icy city at the heart of the plane itself as it launches its payload like a gigantic act of vision or caress of the mind over its object of scrutiny. Babylon: gaudy, sinister, beautiful, and doomed. Isaiah's and Daniel's. The Babylon of the Apocalypse. Itself and the version flying above it now—the ultimate divided mind.

There is the Babylon described by the Greek geographers, the Babylon ransacked by Xerxes and mourned by Alexander who would have built it up again but died there instead at 35.

Walls, palaces of gold, blue glaze. And streets. "The streets of Babylon" Nebuchadnezzar boasts to his gods "which my father who begot me has made," glittering streets. . . . "When you traverse these streets, my lords, may benefit for me rest upon your lips, may I attain eternal age."

For in Babylon the gods were masons, or rather more accurately, the masons were fallen gods working out the punishment of their rebellion. So it is *our* Satan (fallen angel) offering the apple, versus *their* Satan (fallen angel) building the city streets. The apple of knowledge (of good and evil) discerns, analyzes, distinguishes, divides, makes streets out of what had been sand and wind. Makes silicon chips out of what had been sand. Makes directions, instructions. Makes closure.

Shouts the young hero Marduk over whose fallen image Isaiah exults: I have made Earth as the mirror of Heaven; and I will build my city, my beloved streets.

On earth: the city, the structure of concatenations we call *meaning*; and above it, out of the heavens, its mirror—the western mind freed of its body, the icy blue mind.

And the Angel crying “Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city.”

## 2.

I had wanted to compose words to speak of this war, but it is unspeakable.

One of its most frightening aspects, it seems to me, is the degree to which language is being asked to keep it unspeakable. The degree to which language is being asked to collaborate and make it possible.

We have been witnessing the erosion of language in our culture for some time now—language having become primarily a means for sales—of desires, emotions, ideas, identities. The automatic reflex for most of us any longer is to try to go underneath it, underneath the actual words, to find out “what is really going on.”

Think of it: not *through* language, but underneath it. Not *via* our words, but in spite of them.

When a language is used against the truth, something terrible begins to happen to its people.

These days civilian casualties are “collateral.” To bomb something is to “visit” it. And “revisit” it. Something built by human hands and ingenuity, perhaps inhabited by human dream, hit by a bomb and obliterated is “acquired.” Once bombed it is an “asset.” To bomb something with beneficial consequences is to have it “pay dividends.”

To kill is to “neutralize” or to “take out.”

We are used to these kinds of euphemisms—this casual censorship. And it has become second nature for us to simply try to sever the word from its meaning in order to “hear” what is being said. As in,

“oh, yes, by *collateral* we mean people, like us, hiding in their basements, trying to comfort and feed their terrified children.”

But that gets exhausting. After a while it’s easier to use the short-cut term. The lie. After a while it’s better not to think about it at all because we can’t really, given these instruments.

After a while our language becomes languages—one to each mind. The subjectivity becomes absolute. After a while there is no apprehensible *text*, there, underneath the interpretation. We are alone, each. Or, worse yet, *it* doesn’t really exist because *I* can’t really know it. Whatever we mean by *really* or *know*. This leads to a place where not only are we protected from what seems to be now the horror of deep feeling (as well as its joy) but, more frighteningly, where we are protected from our responsibilities—the simple responsibilities, the ferocious and clear ones, the ones we are not free without: *do I have blood on my hands?* for example. Or *who is killing whom in my name?*

I think of Ted Berrigan’s cry of anguish—“I have articulated my moral impulses out of existence”—and am frightened by that darkest-yet use of language, the very wellspring being used to siphon its own spring dry.

The mind grows overwhelmed, even the best mind. We become a nation of fact-gatherers instead of thinkers, of callers-in to talk shows instead of voters. A nation on Prozac dropping bombs, but only on TV, so you can switch it off.

### 3.

Once you start going underneath the words for things it is an endless dark in there. All sorts of things can go unnoticed. One form of that dark involves using technical jargon for the thing—so as to denature it, suck out of it its human relevance—but secretly, in the name of greater accuracy.

Another form of that dark involves the mind convincing itself, again in the name of greater precision, that it can’t honestly name anything because the thing won’t, in any objective sense, be known by naming. Representation becomes not the bold and brilliant construct the human mind has long understood as the stunning lie that tells the greater truth—but rather, in an appallingly more naive sense,

representation is seen as a terrible illusion. The garment, apparently shot full of holes, is lifted, by those who didn't realize it was a glorious and eternal disguise, off the body of the thing. *The final belief is in a fiction*—Wallace Stevens is screaming at our deafness—*it is time to choose.*

When words like *justice* and *morality* become deprived of any meaning—as in, for instance, Mr. Bush's vacant phrases of last Tuesday: "All wars are fought for a reason. But a *just war* is fought for the *right reason*, the *moral reason*. *Our use of force is moral*"—when these words become husks of significance, when they are cut off not only from their denotative and connotative life, but also from their history of meaning, when they can be deployed as mere sound, as a jingle that will sell a product, a barely recognizable fragrance or flavor that will function as a subliminal sales pitch, we are in a terrifying dark indeed. One in which our chief instrument for belief, for self-creation, is silently being taken from us. One in which the lifeline which connects us to our world—to the earth itself—*feeling*—is being severed. No censorship imposed by the state is as forceful as this ugly silence, this gag made of *what sounds like words* slowly being accepted by the human spirit.

To quote George Steiner "Languages are living organisms. Infinitely complex, but organisms nevertheless. They have in them a certain life-force, and certain powers of absorption and growth. But they can decay, and they can die."

"A language shows that it has in it the germ of dissolution in several ways. Actions of the mind that were once spontaneous become mechanical, frozen habits (dead metaphors, stock similies, slogans). Words grow . . . more ambiguous. Instead of style there is rhetoric. Instead of precise common usage, there is jargon. . . . All these technical failures accumulate to the essential failure: the language no longer sharpens thought but blurs it. Instead of charging every expression with the greatest available energy and directness, it loosens and disperses the intensity of feeling. . . . In short, the language is no longer lived; it is merely spoken."

As Steiner so often points out, this condition can last for a very long time. "Latin remained in use long after the springs of life in Roman civilization had run dry. But where it has happened, something essential in a civilization will not recover." And that is what is happening here. That is why there is at the core of our apparent

material excess such a profound numbness of spirit, such an inescapable sense of superficiality and dissolution.

Languages have great sinew and power. They can absorb masses of hysteria, illiteracy, and cheapness. But there comes, as Steiner goes on to say, a breaking point. "Use a language to conceive, organize and justify hell; use it to dehumanize man, turn it upside down to say 'light' where there was blackness and 'victory' where there is disaster, something will happen to it. Make of words conveyors of terror and falsehood, something will happen to the words. Something of the lies and sadism will settle into the marrow of the language. Imperceptibly at first, like the poisons of radiation sifting silently into the bone. But the cancer will begin, the deep-set destruction. The language will no longer grow. It will no longer perform, quite as well as it used to, its two principal functions: the conveyance of the humane order which we call law, and the communication of the quick of the human spirit which we call grace."

#### 4.

The ultimate reality *is* a fiction. There is still time to choose. But I ask you, fellow teachers, researchers, thinkers, speculators, lovers of mind, how do we create, or envision, that fiction—what language will hold still for us—when we have, through intricately and beautifully evolved theoretical techniques (what most of us in the academy call *thinking* now) obliterated any possible sense of a bedrock—fact, event, place, perception, matter itself vanishing under our increasingly brilliant relativistic gaze? How accurate do we want our vision to be? Pin-point? And does its constant hair-splitting accuracy have anything to do with that crucial generalization we used to call *truth*? And yet, how do we stop the erosion, the peeling off of layers—the fission enacted by the human intellect onto itself—without being false to the very nature of mind? Do we really believe we can hand on to our children a place barely even made of words, a place made of interpretations, of the glimpses we catch in the crack between interpretations, of fluttering immateriality, and expect them to live in it? Are we, by our intellectual genius, in a sense dematerializing the world so totally that a nuclear dematerialization is already prepared for? When before in history has there been a people for whom *no fact is true*? For whom every description of reality is private, for whom every system of description is only one stratum of perception, and

there is no common language for moving from one stratum to another? What started out as a crucial philosophical skepticism, enhanced by relativity, psychology, and the brilliant speculations of contemporary theory and physics, and finally exploded by technology itself—(computer generated photographs? computer generated photographs of the holocaust?)—has created a surface so liquid it is barely a wind. And that wind blows through us. In a recent poll taken of 16 to 24 year-olds, the vast majority said they believed the world has less than a hundred years left. How do you live exclusively in the present? Are memory and hope “intellectual constructs”? Maybe this fluidity will spawn a new way of believing. It is possible we are in a massive transition to a post-material age. And yet certainly, out of such liquidity, we can sense a level of deceit that makes us all dizzy. It puts our children up in the air in the ultimate present-tense spot, some abstract target beneath them, something distant, something wholly *other*, something that can't be owned either by a bomb or an act of interpretation, something that has *content*—something green, say, maybe the cradle of civilization, maybe their own beginnings—the text? the world?—a trigger in one hand, minutes to spare. It puts *us* in front of the TV set clicking from channel to channel trying to “find the real” behind the events, feeling it all dissolve into mere words, then mere images, mere numbers, mere deaths—the ultimate amoral, contentless, “free,” deconstructed spot. If “it” has no content, only strategies, then we are finally “free” of it—free of the terror, free of the pity. Is this what the idea of democracy finally spawns? This “freedom”?

Is it possible we didn't anticipate having our intellectual values and procedures reflected in the culture? Did we really secretly perceive the culture as some dumb beast and our thinking somehow “free” of its lumbering, blissfully “above” it...? Because surely we can't overlook the way in which our intellectual stance towards content and the free-standing a-priori life of a created text reflects and creates our stance towards the world, towards matter itself. Our methods, our “thinking,” trickle down, as a bearing—moral and spiritual—as the *life* of our society. If *it*—text, world—is deprived of an inherent, central, intended, shared communicable meaning, then we are, of course, freed of our accountability to that meaning (nature? god? history? our own actions?). It might feel great to discover oneself suddenly “free” in that sense, especially regarding the intentions of a text—and indeed it *does* feel thrilling given some of the absurdly narrowminded readings we had come to by habit, it *does* feel,

suddenly, like a brilliant new frontier being broken, one for which the reaching into virtual space is the aptest physical correlative. But that sense of exhilaration cannot be seen outside of its cultural and political and, most importantly, its psycho-cultural (or *mythic*) shadow. In relation to matter, and the planet earth, is it, perhaps, not so much freedom as a terrifying giddiness, a shuddering-off of crucial responsibilities of belief and stewardship; the ultimate hubris?

## 5.

Of course, one of the most exciting aspects of moving one's mind along the lines of deconstructive theory involves precisely how morally and intellectually impregnable one feels. The sensation of power that comes from that going-underneath, from being able to see through every position—of being the one-who-sees-through oneself (so that one cannot be oneself seen-through) *is* thrilling . . . I guess one could say it is a position of great "freedom." But from what? That ultimate being-seen-through which the trajectory of one's choices opens one to?

What we are experiencing in our critical procedures sometimes resembles a great adolescent crisis in relation to reality. Reality as parent; the human mind as furious child, hovering upstairs above the problem of Life, refusing to come down, in a state of fury self-flatteringly referred to as "aporia"—the mystical overtones of that notion masking its deeply adolescent all-options-open refusal of the limitations and ennobling responsibilities of *choice*. Especially the kind of choice the belief in a stable terminology, in the possibility of stable reference, involves. After all, just because words are indefinite doesn't mean they're indeterminate. Just because things don't have proveable, objective, forensic meanings, doesn't mean they have *no* meaning. As human beings, haven't we always had to count on things we can't prove?

Maybe we could just think of this as the *greater* dizziness—the enabling, ennobling, metaphysical dizziness—this understanding and acceptance of the true fluidity of words, and this choice to believe their *relative* meaning sufficient to hold us.

The opportunities afforded the human soul by the acceptance of a limited view which the making of choice entails cannot be overesti-

mated, it seems to me. One is *created* by limited point-of-view, by the suffering it entails, in a way that one cannot be simply by the overall mid-air view we now think of as “understanding,” because it is a condition in which action is by definition impossible—the action of interpretation as well as the action of moral discernment. At the very least, both capacities should be present in us at once. Particle and wave. Left- and right-handed paths.

Of course, that one would want to arrive at a state of mind where action is impossible can be seen, perhaps, as a desperate corrective measure to a world gone mad with indiscriminate action. But it is the way in which this method trains one for an astounding moral passivity which, it seems to me, all of us in academia must examine. What does it ultimately, truly, serve, this power to reduce the world and all its creation to an equivalent state of non-meaning?

Isn't the fury and metaphysical impatience in such an attitude something we must admit to? And how it connects with the deeply American (Warholian) sense that if you're not the Director the movie's not worth being in? Perhaps the reason such theory has overwhelmed the American Academy when it has not held equivalent sway over the French involves these clearly more pronounced American starring-role fantasies: the reader as the ultimate auteur-director of the movie which is his, only his, cast with thousands all himself. . . .

## 6.

Recently I was in Washington, D.C., and visited the Van Dyke exhibit. I was struck by two rooms of portraits: upper-class merchants painted, one to a canvas, wearing pure black from head to toe—brocade, organza, black-on-black embroidery—a shallow, shadowy black background—no background really. In each painting three whitish areas in the black expanse: the head at the top and, far off, below, near the sides of the frame, the two hands, fingers very carefully painted. And black running all the way down to the wrist, all the way up the neck. There seemed to be a fascination, on the part of the painter, with the fabric. There seemed to be no body, there, beneath the black. And in painting after painting, those hands cut off from the head—no body in between, no heart, to reconcile them to each other, to negotiate the right relation between them. Just the

desire of the hands, pure in their grasping, and the equally pure and frightening because unchecked grasping desire of the head. A terrifying trinity. One becomes obsessed with what is missing: in this case, the body. I began to think of Magellan and Raleigh. Of the hands moving out over the wilderness, the colonies. Of the head finding itself now a scalpel, now a microscope, now a dictionary. I looked at the paintings again. A black geography—the hands probing “in the name of Ferdinand and Imana, his daughter, Queen of Castille and Leon, conquerers of barbarian nations,” the hands like Christopher whose name means the Christ-bearer and to whom “in reality it was an unspeakable satisfaction to contemplate the salvation of these souls, which, but for him, would have been forever lost.” The fingery hands on the compass, crossing the oceans; and the island head, virgin queen, all eyes, forward-facing. The crazy current called History set into motion by the draught between them.

My friend whose brother flies for the Air Force tells me he feels barely equal to the intelligence of the plane. That he has little sense of the land beneath him as he tries to keep up with the plane’s all-consuming virgin brilliance. He says the next generation of planes will involve technology that eliminates the need for touch. You will be able to look at the control to activate it.

And the body gone, the body completely gone.

When I look back at the painting it is hard for me to tell any longer. I know we have to rebuild the land inbetween, the great female expanse of flesh, to reconnect the hands to the mind. But is it too late? Is there a way back? Is the *black* brocade or is it ash?

## 7.

A society is as alive as its capacity to dream and foster dreaming.

A society is as alive as its belief in language’s capacity for conveying truth. If its words grow hollow—if they finally blow off the thing they were the living skin of—the thing itself is not killed. It is still there, the world. It still glows in the sun. But our capacity to be in it, to in-habit it, is gone. We are left adrift, alone, holding these various husks. We can use them for a while. But they are light and meaningless. They blow away in the least wind.

Then here we are. A war out there, whatever that means. Us in here, whatever that means. Our capacity for feeling—that fragile medium that connects us, that permits our accountability—our capacity for taking action, our hearts—cut off. Language a garment suddenly made to shroud the world and *protect us from it!*

Here we are now, protected.

Want to switch channels?

I would like to close by reading two poems. It seems to me that perhaps the primary function of the creative use of language—in our age—is to try to constantly restore words to their meanings, to keep the living tissue of responsibility alive. Word by word—as if they were cells. Elsewise, as Wallace Stevens says,

*It is a sound like any other.  
It will end.*

## AT THE CABARET NOW

The Americans are lonely. They don't know what happened.

They're still up and there's all this time yet to kill.

The musicians are still being paid so they keep on.

The sax pants up the ladder, up.

They want to be happy. They want to just let the notes  
come on, the mortal wounds, it's all been

paid for so what the hell, each breath going up, up,

them thinking of course Will he make it How far can he

go? Skill, the prince of the kingdom, there at *his* table  
now.

Is there some other master, also there, at a

back table, a regular, one we can't make out

but whom the headwaiter knows, the one who never  
applauds?

So that it's not about the ending, you see, or where to go  
from here.

It's about the breath and how it reaches the trumpeter's hands,

how the hands come so close to touching the breath,

and how the gold thing, gleaming, is there in between,

the only avenue—the long way—captivity.

Like this thing now, slow, extending the metaphor to make a  
place. Pledge allegiance. By which is meant

see, here, what a variety tonight, what a good crowd,

some of them saying yes, yes, some others no,

don't they sound good together?

And all around this, space, and seedspores,

and the green continuance.

And all along the musicians still getting paid so let them.

And all around that the motionlessness—

don't think about it though, because you can't.

And then the mother who stayed at home of course because her  
body . . .

Farewell.

Farewell.

This is the story of a small strict obedience.  
Human blood.  
And how it rivered into all its bloods.  
Small stream, really, in the midst of the other ones.  
In it children laughing and laughing which is the sound of ripening.  
Which the musicians can't play—but that is another tale.  
Someone invited them in, humanity, and they came in.  
They said they knew and then they knew.  
They made this bank called justice and then this other one called not.  
They swam in the river although sometimes it was notes.  
And some notes are true, even now, yes.  
They knew each other, then winter came  
which was a curtain, and then spring which was when they realized it was a curtain.  
Which leads us to this, the showstopper: summer, the Americans.  
I wish I could tell you the story—so and so holding his glass up,  
the table around him jittery,  
and how then *she* came along gliding between the tables  
whispering *it exists*—enough to drive them all mad of course—  
whispering *sharp as salt*, whispering *straw on fire looking at you*—  
The Americans whispering it cannot be, stay where you are.  
And the one in the back no one knows starting up the applause,  
alone,  
a flat sound like flesh beating flesh but only *like* it.  
Tell me,  
why did we live, lord?  
Blood in a wind,  
why were we meant to live?

## THE PHASE AFTER HISTORY

### 1

Then two juncos trapped in the house this morning.

The house like a head with nothing inside.

The voice says: come in.

The voice always whispering *come in, come*.

Stuck on its one track.

As if there were only one track.

Only one way in.

Only one *in*.

The house like a head with nothing inside.

A table in the white room.

Scissors on the table.

Two juncos flying desperately around the  
room of the house like a head

(with nothing inside)

the voice-over keeping on (come in, *in*),

them fizzing around the diagram that makes no

sense—garden of upstairs and downstairs—wilderness  
of materialized

meaning.

*Home.*

Like this piece of paper—

yes take this piece of paper—

the map of the house like a head with

whatever inside—two birds—

and on it all my efforts to get the *house* out of their  
way—

to make detail withdraw its hot hand,

its competing naturalness—

Then I open the two doors to make a draft

(here)—

meaning by that an imbalance

for them to find and ride—  
The inaudible hiss—justice—washing through,  
the white sentence that comes alive to  
rectify imbalance—  
—give me a minute.  
In the meantime

they fly into the panes of glass: bright light,  
silently they throw themselves into its law: bright light,  
they float past dreamed-up on the screen  
called 7 a.m., nesting season, black blurry terms,  
the thwacking of their  
heads onto resistant  
surfaces.  
Then one escapes,

sucked out by the doorful of sky,  
the insanity, *elsewhere*,  
so that—give me a second—  
I no longer remember it,  
and the other one vanishes though into here, upstairs,  
the voice still hissing under the track *in in*,

the voice still hissing over the track.  
What you do now is wait  
for the sound of wings to be heard  
somewhere in the house  
—the *peep* as of glass bottles clinking,  
the lisp of a left-open book read by breeze,  
or a hand going into the pile of dead leaves—

(as where there is no *in*, therefore)  
(as where—give me a minute—someone laughs upstairs  
but it's really wings  
rustling up there  
on the cold current called history  
which means of course it's late and I've  
got things

to do).  
How late is it: for instance, is this a sign?

Two birds then one: is it a meaning?  
I start with the attic, moving down.  
Once I find it in the guest-  
bedroom but can't  
catch it in time,  
talking to it all along, hissing: stay there, don't

move—absolutely no  
story—sure there is a sound I could make with my throat  
and its cupful of wind that could transmit  
meaning. *Still* I say sharply as I move towards it hands out—  
High-pitched the sound it makes with its throat,  
low and too tender the sound it makes with its

body—against the walls now,  
down.

Which America is it in?  
Which America are we in here?  
Is there an America comprised wholly  
of its waiting and my waiting and all forms of the thing

even the green's—  
a large uncut fabric floating above the soil—  
a place of *attention*?

The voice says wait. Taking a lot of words.  
The voice always says wait.  
The sentence like a tongue  
in a higher mouth

to make the other utterance, the inaudible one,  
possible,  
the sentence in its hole, its cavity  
of listening,  
flapping, half dead on the wing, through the  
hollow indoors,  
the house like a head  
with nothing inside  
except this breeze—  
shall we keep going?  
Where is it, in the century clicking by?

Where, in the America that *exists*?  
This castle hath a pleasant seat,  
  
the air nimbly recommends itself,  
the guest approves  
by his beloved mansionry  
that heaven's breath smells wooingly here.

2.

The police came and got Stuart, brought him to  
Psych Hospital.

The face on him the face he'd tried to cut off.  
Starting at the edge where the hair is fastened.

Down behind the ear.

As if to lift it off and give it back. Easy. Something  
gelatinous,  
an exterior  
destroyed by mismanagement.

Nonetheless it stayed on.

You suffer and find the outline, the right  
seam (what the suffering is for)—

you find *where it comes off*: why can't it come off?

The police brought him to Admitting and he can  
be found there.

Who would have imagined a face  
could be so full of blood.

Later he can be found in a room on 4.

He looks up when you walk in but not at yours.  
Hope is something which lies flat against the wall,  
a bad paint job, peeling in spots.

Some people move by in the hallway,

some are referred elsewhere or they

wait.

There is a transaction going on up ahead, a commotion.  
Shelley is screaming about the Princess.

There is a draft here but between two unseen  
openings.

And there is the Western God afraid His face would come off  
into our eyes

so that we have to wait in the cleft  
rock—remember?—

His hand still down on it, we're waiting for Him to  
go by,

the back of Him is hope, remember,  
the off-white wall,  
the thing-in-us-which-is-a-kind-of-fire fluttering  
as we wait in here  
for His hand to lift off,  
the thing-in-us-which-is-a-kind-of-air  
getting coated with waiting, with the cold satinfinish,

the thing-which-trails-behind (I dare do all that may  
become a man,

who dares do more is none)  
getting coated, thickly. Oh screw thy story to the  
sticking place—

When he looks up

because he has had the electric shock,  
and maybe even the insulin shock we're not sure,  
the face is gone.

It's hiding somewhere in here now.

I look and there's no listening in it, foggy place.

We called him the little twinkler  
says his mother at the commitment hearing,

because he was the happiest.

The blood in the upstairs of the duplex getting cold.  
Then we have to get the car unimpounded.

Send the keys to his parents.  
Do they want the car?

His wrists tied down to the sides of the bed.  
And the face on that shouldn't come off.

The face on that mustn't come off.  
Scars all round it along the hairline under the  
chin.

Later he had to take the whole body off

to get the face.

But me in there while he was still breathing,  
both of us waiting to hear something rustle  
and get to it  
before it rammed its lights out  
aiming for the brightest spot, the only clue.

3.

Because it is the face  
which must be taken off—?  
the forward-pointing of it, history?  
that we be returned to the faceless  
attention,  
the waiting and waiting for the telling sound.  
Am I alone here?

Did it get out when the other one did  
and I miss it?

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.  
The head empty, yes,

but on it the face, the idea of principal witness,  
the long corridor behind it—  
a garden at one end and a garden at  
the other—  
the spot of the face  
on the expanse of the body,  
the spot on the emptiness (tomorrow and tomorrow),  
the spot pointing  
into every direction, looking, trying to find  
corners—

(and all along the cloth of Being fluttering)  
(and all along the cloth, the sleep—

before the beginning, before the itch—)

How I would get it back  
sitting here on the second-floor landing,  
one flight above me one flight below,  
listening for the one notch  
on the listening which isn't me

listening—

Sleep, sleep, but on it the dream of reason, eyed,  
pointing forward, tapering for entry,  
the *look* with its meeting place at  
vanishing point, blade honed for  
quick entry,  
etcetera, glance, glance again,  
(make my keen knife see not the  
wound it makes)—

So that you 1) must kill the King—yes—  
2) must let her change, change—until you lose her,  
the creature made of nets,

whose eyes are closed,  
whose left hand is raised  
(now now now now hisses the voice)  
(her hair made of sentences) and  
3) something new come in but  
what? listening.

Is the house empty?

Is the emptiness housed?

Where is America here from the landing, my face on

my knees, eyes closed to hear  
further?

Lady M. is the intermediary phase.

God help us.

Unsexed unmanned.

Her open hand like a verb slowly descending onto the free,  
her open hand fluttering all round her face now,  
trying to still her gaze, to snag it on

those white hands waving and diving  
in the water that is not there.

NOTE:

Books used as source material, or quoted from, include: *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia*, translated and introduced by N. K. Sandars (Penguin Books, 1971); *Language and Silence* by George Steiner (Atheneum, 1982); *Beyond Geography* by Frederick Turner (Rutgers University Press, 1986); and *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* by Wallace Stevens (Knopf, 1957).

The poems are from *Region of Unlikeness* (Ecco Press, 1991).

### *Erratum*

NOTE:

Books used as source material, or quoted from, include: *Poems of Heaven and Hell from Ancient Mesopotamia*, translated and introduced by N. K. Sandars (Penguin Books, 1971), quoted in paragraph 2 and elsewhere in section 1; “The Hollow Miracle” (1959), in *Language and Silence* by George Steiner (Atheneum, 1980); *Beyond Geography* by Frederick Turner (Rutgers University Press, 1983); and *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens* by Wallace Stevens (Knopf, 1957).

The poems are from *Region of Unlikeness* (Ecco Press, 1991).

Some liberties are taken with the Steiner quotations in the last paragraph of section 3—the entire paragraph constituting more of a condensation of his language over a number of pages.



Sandy Dyas

Jorie Graham was educated at a French *lycée* in Rome and at the Sorbonne, New York University (B.A., 1973), Columbia University, and the University of Iowa (M.F.A., 1978). She is the author of four volumes of poetry, *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980), *Erosion* (1983), *The End of Beauty* (1987), and *Region of Unlikeness* (1991), and editor of the 1990 volume of the annual anthology, *Best American Poetry*. Among her prizes and honors are the Pushcart Prize (1980, 1982, 1983), the *American Poetry Review* prize (1982), the Whiting Foundation award (1986), and the Academy of American Poets' Lavan Award (1990). She has held fellowships from the Radcliffe Institute (1982), the Guggenheim Foundation (1983), and the National Endowment for the Arts (1985) and is now a fellow of the John T. and Catherine D. MacArthur Foundation (1990-1995). She has taught at Murray State University (1978-79), California State University at Humboldt (1979-82), and Columbia University and the Writers' Community in New York City (1982-83). Since 1983 Professor Graham has been a permanent member of the poetry faculty of the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa.

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