

Rivista di Letterature Moderne e Comparate e Storia delle arti

fondata da Carlo Pellegrini e Vittorio Santoli



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Direzione

Patrizio Collini
Università di Firenze (patrizio.collini@unifi.it)

Claudio Pizzorusso
Università di Napoli "Federico II" (claudio.pizzorusso@unina.it)

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Coordinamento redazionale

Barbara Innocenti (barbara.innocenti@unifi.it)
Michela Landi (michela.landi@unifi.it)
Claudio Pizzorusso (claudio.pizzorusso@unina.it)
Valerio Viviani (vviviani@unitus.it)

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c/o Prof.ssa Michela Landi
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JORIE GRAHAM'S POETIC FLOWS: LINES ABOUT HUMAN NATURE, LINES ABOUT POETIC SKILL

This article focuses on the poetry of Jorie Graham (Graham 1950) and her poetic statements. It aims to understand her complex poetic trajectories better, leading us to her interest in history, languages, art, and philosophy. This American poet often writes and speaks about her poetic skill and locates the main aspects that throw light on it in the fact that she grew up in a multilingual environment, in her recognition or rather in a philosophical attempt to distinguish between various mentalities (European – because she grew up and was educated in Italy and France, and American – which she was exposed to during her schooling in the United States of America) and various methods of writing, as well as in the spontaneous discovery of connections with other poets. How did this compendium of influences determine her writing, themes, form, and style? How did it determine her understanding of human existence, the interconnectedness of people and nature? Weston Cutter emphasizes that, in Graham's poetry, the word "connecting" vibrates more passionately than others, as well as the almost "seismic desire" to be connected to the readers, to explain to them what she is writing about, so that the readers feel and understand the pores of her poetic fabric and the issues that are being touched on¹.

Through various forms and stylistic means, Jorie Graham returns to issues of history, language, human nature, art, politics, and "the pressures of the modern world," thus constantly developing a dialogue with everything, according to Calvin Bedient. The features of her poetry have been addressed by critics of various theoretical orientations, such as Helen Vendler, who, in a text titled "Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess," offers a new perception of Graham's poetry in a unique way that exudes a particular intellectual curiosity. Vendler quotes John Keats and Wallace Stevens, considering those quotations crucial to understanding some aspects of Graham's poetics, with an emphasis on Keats' understanding of poetry which "should surprise by a fine excess"², while one of the features of that "nuanced excess" is a long verse which leads us along the trajectories of Graham's poetry and emerges from "short poems in short lines"³, "lines with a hesitant rhythm"⁴, and then with "a burst of almost tidal energy"⁵ and finishes with long poems, "poems that pressed towards an excess nearly uncontainable by the page"⁶. In the mentioned text, Vendler further elaborates on the importance of the perception of Keats' and Stevens' influence on Graham's poetry, inspir-

ing us to revive the intensity and beauty of the poetic images that exist in Graham's texts that are interwoven with music and numerous other elements.

In this revival of the intensity and beauty that pervade Graham's poetic work, careful readers, as Craig Morgan Teicher and Dan Chiasson point out in their reviews of Graham's poetry collection *From the New World* (2015), may follow the "canny movement of her subjects" and the alternation of shorter and longer lines, which in her poetry remind one of "two people [...] sparring over the controls"⁷. Graham's sequences of verses, extraordinary – as characterized by Chiasson – stem from her desire to present "epistemological turbulence"⁸ and particular victories over poems that gave an impression of hopelessness and incompleteness. Similarly, as Graham metaphorically suggests, each poem is partly net, partly wind. At the same time, its finely knotted phrases and lines act with all their might to "hold" the reader's curiosity which passes through them⁹.

Chiasson's research moves further in a direction that assumes the contours of searching for interspace/emptiness in this poet's verse:

If there is one quirk in her writing that has fed her detractors, it is the use of these lacunae, as though the poet had forfeited her role as a kind of dowser or metal detector, looking everywhere for language's buried substrate. But the poems need gaps and ciphers because Graham's subjectivity, responding in the moment, requires placeholders, a way of representing intuitions that aren't made of words, or not yet¹⁰.

While she talks about her poetics and considers the patterns of poems which create a framework for understanding the essence – similar to the way she looks at the pictures of her favorite painters – while she examines and elaborates thoughts which, like a guiding idea, shatter the ossified layers of her poetics and hint at something new, we carefully listen in and notice that her poetry arises before/from/after music, that it "consists of syntax, rhythm, modulation of tone which is connected to experiences of deep emotions," of melodic transitions. This modulation is an act, an act which is an experience¹¹. While they are connected by intensity – in some of the charges of Graham's poetic images – we feel the way her memories of growing up in a trilingual environment, of her extraordinary knowledge of literature, philosophy, and art, which go into her poetry, give light to them, even if the intensity of their going in is different and is accompanied by the music that we sense, because it vibrates, woven into the fabric of her poetic reflections, thus

“convinc[ing], mov[ing], transform[ing]”¹². In this context, it is worth mentioning one attitude of this poet:

I wanted to write in that music and explore everything that music could do [...] a whole other kind of music that I didn't even know existed, that I was capable of engaging, exploring, using, developing. (Williams: “A new music is a new mind”). At a certain point you realize that if you change the way in which you are proceeding musically, you will move out of the experiences that you already know you know and begin to have emotions and, therefore, perhaps thoughts, and certainly intimations or even visions of things that you had no access to except via that music¹³.

Attracted by her words and the rhythm of her poetry, we think about their legacy in the canon of American writing, and something that cannot escape our gaze relates to the ambivalences that those words and rhythms have in giving hope and/or hopelessness while leading us towards a more complex process, the process of listening to a “new silence,” a silence which, in the words of this poet, leads the creator towards new questions, new music, to inspirational content which, as Graham concludes, will overcome the feeling of fatigue and saturation, and lead to the entry into a new form, but also to something that is more complex and can be characterized as stasis in the dark, after which the process, that is, the encounter with new music, is repeated¹⁴. In line with the reflections of numerous critics, who note the nuances, key points, dominant images, and complexity of form that arise from consideration “of the dualities and polarities of life, of the creative and destructive tensions that exist between spirit and flesh, the real and the mythical, stillness and motion, the interior and exterior existence”¹⁵, Helen Vendler reviews the poetry collection that Graham published under the title *The End of Beauty* (1987). In the introduction, she describes the mentioned collection as a suggestive step in the struggle against the formal plotline or the sudden ending¹⁶. Vendler maps remarkable places, places of insecurity and unpredictability because, as she states, uncertainty is a significant emotional preoccupation in the poems of the aforementioned collection¹⁷. What continues as a practice after *The End of Beauty*, according to Vendler, is the long line present in the collection *Region of Unlikeness* (1991), which “drops its earlier partner, the open numbered space, which had represented being-in-pause,”¹⁸ as well as “the plot of the narrative which replaces bundled quanta of perception”¹⁹.

Thinking further about the complexities that characterize her poetry and about the conclusions regarding the uniqueness of her

poetic achievements, we read Calvin Bedient's text about Graham's collection *Materialism* (1993), which, within her oeuvre, represents a serious step forward in the context of temperament (metaphysical temperament which dominates), a transition to the territory called the material²⁰, while, as Bedient states, it is as if Graham considers her goal in *Materialism* to be the perception of time and space in the first phase, going on to examine in the second phase the process of alienation of time and space, and the moment when this alienation happens²¹. The poet looks at the aforementioned world with passion and finds that its dividedness is "frequent and remarkable" and that it often leads to bursting point, "like a balloon," "a balloon wanting to line the whole universe, but only thus can the poet see through the small human order (all too thick a surround in most current poetry) to the seductions and evasions of the material grandeur of reality"²², Bedient writes, in the manner of a skilled presenter and storyteller, indicating that we are talking about a world of endless layers and insatiable passion, a desire for involvement in the processes of this world, which is what Graham's "dialogue with everything" leads to²³.

Bonnie Costello, in one of the best essays on Graham's poetry published under the title "Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion," in which the critic manages to avoid repetition and the uninspired practice of limited reading according to a suffocating and narrow-minded model, in the introductory part of the text focuses on the general characteristics of Graham's poetics, in which she recognizes the existence of "philosophical depth and sensual vision"²⁴, her distinctive style and diversity of themes, which she considers significant at a time when poetry was "stigmatized for its shrunken ambition, or sidetracked by politics and ideology"²⁵. Evaluating her art against criteria that a significant part of the corpus of contemporary poetry would not withstand, Costello, speaking metaphorically, represents Graham's *Erosion* (1983) in the following way for the reader: she emphasizes the poet's linguistic eloquence and fearlessness. She compares her poetic project with the achievements of significant artists from the past, pointing to their twists of thoughts, integrated poetic imagery, and tense unity²⁶. In a certain sense, what can also be understood, Costello interprets, is Graham's understanding of the logical sense of the poetic form concerning the force of erosion, after which the reader is inspired to think about "loss, the past, history, evolution, dispersion" and the feeling of grief which accompanies them even though they are, as Costello states, almost always estranged from their opposite, set against "the aesthetic transformation of the world as iconic design"²⁷. Costello adds, furthermore, that where *Erosion* imagi-

nes the construction of what we can define as a “centered eternal space set apart from the flux”²⁸, the collection *The End of Beauty* (1987) concerns itself with edges, boundaries, origins, and ends, images unraveling into “minutes” and leads to dialogue through a moment of silence which decomposes in the narrative, adding to it infinity and elusiveness²⁹. Costello directs the reader to observe those movements and how the reader can fill the gaps on Graham’s pages like a trace on a “long and winding road.” She shows that such involvements by the readers exude admiration and fear, evoking the poetic solid momentum of this poet, who suggests that we understand how we observe what she understood through the ideal understanding of poetic movement the way Elizabeth Bishop thought about it when she accepted the opinion of the critic Morris Kroll, who stated that an ideal perception of poetic movement can be that it represents “not a thought, but a mind thinking”³⁰.

The philosophical attitude of this poet is strikingly expressed in the verses of the collection *Materialism*³¹. In Elisabeth Frost’s words, the Western concept of attitude, woven into the mentioned poetry, is integrally rounded, and our reflections and perspectives on the world, its various aspects, matter, and life vibrate in it. Therefore, as Frost states, the register of the more significant part of Western philosophy is characterized – and this is also the case in Graham’s work – by a marked distance between subjective experience and the objective world, which is impressively highlighted in her work in the poem titled “Subjectivity,” “in which, in a perfect way, the mentioned duality is presented”³². In an interview with Mark Wunderlich, Graham considers her philosophical attitudes and points to various localities in her poetry, from which identities express their “I” in various ways. She states that this can be through the act of confession, through awareness of the existence of subjects in a social construct, through the spontaneity of life of each of them, which brings with it the joys and pains of life, such as love, death, sensory pleasures from smell to touch, that is the “I” which has no choice when it comes to death³³. Deftly placing T. S. Eliot into the mentioned context, Graham goes on to state that the “I” emerges “from the great philosophical fray of the last decade with a new respect for the mystery of personhood and a more sophisticated understanding of its simultaneously illusory and essential nature”³⁴.

While we are following hints of the explicitly and implicitly philosophical in her poetry and while we attempt to place it in the context of similar poetic practices, one more aspect which is often affirmed through critical practice about Graham’s writing relates to moving and/or being moved from the abstract towards concrete experience. Dan

Chiasson states that the mentioned moving/being moved is hinted at already in the titles of some of her poetry collections (*Materialism, The End of Beauty, Place*). Chiasson also mentions the waves of reception about that part of Graham's poetry characterized as philosophical, stating the ambivalence of the critical attitude towards Graham as a "philosophical" poet, "though her poems that are most directly concerned with philosophy, such as those about Pascal and Heidegger, usually function as refutations of philosophy, or (and it amounts to the same thing) as applications of it to the moods and the senses, which abstract thought often, erroneously, supposes it can bypass"³⁵. In the mentioned presentation, reading Graham's poetry carefully line by line, Chiasson concludes that poets are prone to moving/being moved from the individual to the abstract, from visible reality towards its secret laws; they are interested in solitude, the passage of time, time, while "Graham acts in the opposite direction, from the abstract to concrete experience"³⁶. In any case, the process of Graham's self-examination³⁷ brings into question the ethical context; it does not leave us with a tenable solution because such self-examinations are characterized by disruptions/interruptions and moving/being moved. In this context, Graham writes down a list of the questions occupying her while she tries to enter the essence of artistic form and construct a thought pattern: what is normal? when and where do we reach a climax when dealing with issues about poetics? where is the place of no return? what is the ethical compass when scarcity prevails? where should the line be drawn, what does the line mean in those circumstances, and on what side of the line are we standing? what is the role of the poet in the modern world³⁸?

In the collection of poems titled *Never* (Graham 2003), Graham introduces new reflections on the reader's role and poetic images, still profoundly inspired by the state of the modern world and those elements that speak to us of the threat to it and its possible ruin. In conversation with Thomas Gardner, Graham, as a sensitive observer of society, describes in detail the ruin that can be sensed, highlighting, among other things, the physical intensity of the images from the mentioned poetic collection, which, as she states, are given the function of seekers ready to treat and heal the world. In addition to this, Graham talks precisely about creating an innovative fusion, a long series of structures that lead us towards correction, reconstruct the time of its happening in which we again see the life of certain things and how that life changes, the time of withdrawing from them, consideration of time in general, awareness of the impermanence of everything, and an encounter with the impermanence of the inner³⁹. When the interview with Gardner

concludes, Graham comments that in certain phases of her work, she “passes” her poem through some metric net, working carefully on the mentioned process from the beginning so that any deviation from the primary intention becomes recognizable. She describes the process while mentioning the multitude of her first drafts:

There’s usually a point where I run the whole poem through some kind of a metrical grid – regularizing everything – so I can feel my variations from baseline. I usually compare – often, I must admit, with some bewilderment – the draft with the more “regular” music to the developing one with more “variant” music, and try to feel what is gained and what is lost in each case. That’s a stage which really throws my back, sometimes with a great deal of despair, I must say, onto those acoustic instincts and choices we end up calling a person’s “poetics” – as I can always feel all sorts of implications in differing musical motions – implications – transmissible sensations – that feel much more than “aesthetic” to me⁴⁰.

In that aesthetic, she indeed emphasizes the greatness of experience, which “includes philosophical discursiveness”⁴¹, adding that reflections on the corpus of questions that poems pose are very important: “It brings the reader in as a listener to a confession? A poem is a private story, after all, no matter how apparently public. The reader is always overhearing a confession.”⁴² What’s more, Graham concludes, listening to experience teaches us to survive; it is like a flight that leads us to the gaps in poems, proclaiming the existence of the “emotional quality of silence”⁴³, as if what comes before the poem, or what comes after it, is caught by silence.

In the continuation, while stating her conclusions about the aforementioned process, she also talks about indecision, procrastination, the anticipation of the words that follow, of the unawareness of what there will be in the coming moments; she adds that there are no “small” words because they are neither small nor less significant nor less concrete. She writes them down in an orderly manner in a list hinting at a gradation between them, so there are words on that list that determine physical relations and which are woven into concrete expressions (“like,” “on,” “with,” “beside,” “and,” “through,” “him/her/that”)⁴⁴. Graham emphasizes that that is not always obvious; words give the impression of involvement in the ways things can be known concerning “those beside, or behind, them”⁴⁵ and suggests that we carefully watch the whitespace and gaps in her poems, explaining that the process of considering their existence leads to a re-examination because

In a poem – in any speech act, but most deeply in a poem – the white space is silence. Silence is composed of, or inhabited by, some fundamental coloration for every poet – in other words, what’s in that silence. Or that of which the silence is the emissary. For one it might be God, for another history, for another chance or fate or numbers or the nature of language itself. Some of those strategies involve narrative, some involve fragmentation, some a priori (inherited) formal patterns – every style is the record of the most honest means by which a poet has attempted to feel her way into that unsaid realm, to take its measure, to take on some of its power, to try to get what’s in it to “hear” the human sound, or plea, or description⁴⁶.

In this context, thoughts lead us to the collection *Sea Change* (2008), in which Graham hints at an interest in the difference between “Whitman’s long line” and “Williams’ short line,” as well as considering the place in which the lines reach a moment in which they are arranged down to the bottom of the page, but must convey the moment through changeable ranges between sighs and attention⁴⁷. When we understand Graham’s thought, thus reduced, as an instruction to the readers to look at the lines as a map on which they will recognize the modulations of voice and thought, how they rise and fall, then the readers can witness a unique “evolution of emotion,” and therefore experience it themselves⁴⁸. According to Graham, the sentence functions as a process of eschatological reflection unavoidably influenced by the concept of finiteness. Simultaneously, paradoxically, the feeling of finishing appears as a powerful initiative⁴⁹.

She highlights how a poem, on the way toward its final form, remains intact in a way that she characterizes as powerful. At the same time, behind it, it leaves a peculiar trace “during which complexity – even paradox, contradiction – can be absorbed without being too easily or rapidly resolved”⁵⁰. At the same time, Graham presents an interesting explanation for holding back because while she links it with “Whitman’s loitering, it grows into a plurality of paradoxical complexities and in great measure gives them a voice.”⁵¹ When Graham applies what she calls taking control over the subject or situation, “in order not to confront what in it might be able to change us, what might contradict us – that original ‘us,’ that notion of what we are, or believe we are”⁵², she presents a pattern which serves as her modus of how to begin a poem.

What Graham also considers essential for her poetic voice is closely connected to the context of politics and political activity, to the moment when – as she says in an interview with Katia Grubisic – the body begins to speak. She considers the issue of the mentioned context in the poetry

collections *Never, Overlord* (2005) and *Sea Changes*, which are also an occasion to reflect upon innovation in stringing lines together. She quotes her poetic material and, in the mentioned interview, addresses the possibility that something in the voice of the poems that she wrote in her later period became like a “species” voice, “a cross-over,” “lyric voice,” that “the problematic self is heavy, it is there in one’s shoulders, on one’s soul – it is no illusion. It is vertiginous, horrific,”⁵³ but in essence it is “sufficiently demanding,” because

There is no one else there. You do have a self, your self, no other. You are free to call yourself a “site of intersections,” all you want. No one can deny it. It is also true, in its way. But is it deeply true? Is it morally the most demanding position? I do not think so, and, for me – and I really do not speak for others – it is not useful. You can call your subject position a construct all you want; it feels kind of right, but is it sufficiently demanding, are the pressures it generates enough for a wakeful life? For me, it feels like too much self-accountability is lifted⁵⁴.

She also recalls what she once called an uneasy lull that precedes an unknown and drastic change that appears in a poem, from which questions emerge, such as those about the “place” in which we now live, about what we need to know about that place, about our “place” in the order of living things, about the “place” we are getting to consider it. It is precisely in collections like *Place* that she is trying to reach “the present tense moment in which joy must exist and can be reached”⁵⁵.

While describing the process of writing the poetry collection *Fast*, which was published in 2017, Graham leaves us a pregnant statement in which she remembers the long stretches of silence between poems, describing how she needed to break through, how she felt she had to throw the whole thing out, which leads to her reaching an experience that she did not have before. In her devotion, she turns our attention to the other voices the book attempted to map and leave as a testimony. Graham emphasizes that this is not about a conscious action, nor is it about anything that rationally comes in at the beginning of writing:

[...] the book explores many other aspects of life – but yes, over these years I became increasingly compelled – invited, forced, ethically tempted – to try to find my way to voices one would generally call ‘non-human’, as you point out – or voices that attempted to approach, or approximate, such a state. I don’t want to narrow the experience of the book to this one aspect of it, but yes, it includes this attempt, this practice. I could not get out from under that imperative. It kept reasserting itself⁵⁶.

The process of work on the collection *Fast* (2017) led her to think again about some aspects of artificial intelligence and to reflect again on the feeling of belonging to a species that is involved in the extinction of other species, which represents a significant step forward in Graham's thoughts about the function of poetry, with an emphasis on what she calls the weaker sensing of one's own "individuality," moving towards the general, to "much larger diseases – cultural, creatural, planetary"⁵⁷. It is also important to highlight her focus on the experiences we read about on the pages of her poetry collection *Fast*, in which there are included in her register human feelings of various degrees and intensities, the feeling of one's guilt, mourning for the dead, fear of happiness, of love, daydreaming, the feeling of astonishment which is caused by "reports of genocide in Syria – can I let it into my heart, can I not. And then of course it too is endangered. It overwhelms all of us, it is physically painful"⁵⁸. In conclusion, she mentions "a blind spot" and states how the storyline explodes: "One's sense of time explodes. *What are we to do* – Tolstoy's question – explodes – becomes inconsequential just as it makes one simultaneously paralyzed with urgency"⁵⁹. She also mentions the question that carries the most significant anxiety and relates to our singularity. Specifically, that question is about "how singular we are, or remain, or should remain"⁶⁰ regarding what is considered our common predicament, shared participation in creating the nightmare of the modern world, with the conclusion that in this context, it is not possible to find a place to withdraw, so we thus find a way to arrive at the next critical phase, which Graham characterizes as a phase in which it seems that "We are totally interlinked in ways far less beautiful or spiritually advanced than we had imagined"⁶¹. The mentioned questions arise from/are connected amid what the poet calls being irrationally overwhelmed and the uncontrolled use of means in the hands of a few people who have the power to destroy what remains of human life. She continues with the following words:

The destruction of Palmyra, the beheadings, the pulverization of the child into the child-soldier (as the worldwide trade in child porn as well as, increasingly, porn for children, evince) all enact a desire to kill off the human in one's self. Feeling connected to the past, for example, is a large way one feels 'human'. So being 'post-historical' and being 'post-human' and 'post-nature' are interconnected. The hatred and destruction of childhood or innocence is an essential subject. For those who see a cyborg world ahead, doing away with wonder is just as important as doing away with empathy. The human is hard to eradicate, but I must assume it can be done⁶².

From the perspective of the aforementioned, Graham considers the function of poetry to be immeasurable in terms of its power to influence the tension that determines continuity and/or its interruption, which leads us to the end of the road, whether it is the cliff edge we are going off, which helps us to survive and remain – rehearsals and survivals – and in that sense every succession of verses invents or models both death and resurrection⁶³.

While writing a review for the poetry collection *From The New World: Poems 1976–2014* (2015), Katie Peterson calls Jorie Graham a meditative poet, and she considers Graham's poetry in the context of the tradition of Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost, calling her a poet who builds a narrative of thought, a way for the lyric to forestall its finality and resist its composure⁶⁴. Peterson calls this poetry collection a compendium of the earlier achievements of this poet, in which there dominate a large number of ideas that Graham, in her erudition, develops comprehensively before she concludes the lyric poem, which offers the reader one more life in which we survive fascinated by the observation and feeling of a unique existence, about the role of the body in that existence, and its speaking which is more potent than any idea. The poetic images Graham constructs are powerful in talking about everyday existence and the diversity of experiences, and as such, can take the lead in every battle that resists the destruction, banality, evil, and misfortunes of the modern world, Peterson concludes.

Unique in her poetic work, Graham writes powerful lines and relentlessly reminds us of the poet's responsibility, power and the fact that only a poet of conviction, education, multiculturalism, art, and philosophy can offer a solution to the deconstruction of ossified structures which oppose/slow down the movement towards further understanding of the ills of this world and its healing. Jorie Graham is a poet of the utmost knowledge, scholarliness, and insight, provoking readers to dialogue. That dialogue takes us from the surface level of her linguistic expression deep to the place in her poetic fabric where there lies the realization that it is impossible ultimately to express ourselves about our consciousness, through which provocations penetrate that inspire us to look at human nature, as we would a painting by Piero della Francesca, Gustav Klimt or Jackson Pollock, or a Stanley Kubrick film. From that perspective, the following is written from the perspective of the layering of Graham's poetry. It stands in opposition to a generalized conclusion or pattern, a predictable ending, leaving us thus forever in dialogue with Jorie Graham:

While comparing her to the modernists, James Longenbach emphasizes that:

[...] for 30 years Jorie Graham has engaged the whole human contraption – intellectual, global, domestic, apocalyptic – rather than the narrow emotional slice of it most often reserved for poems. She thinks of the poet not as a recorder but as a constructor of experience. Like [Rainer Maria] Rilke or [William Butler] Yeats, she imagines the hermetic poet as a public figure, someone who addresses the most urgent philosophical and political issues of the time simply by writing poems⁶⁵.

ALEKSANDRA NIKČEVIĆ BATRIĆEVIĆ
(*Universita del Montenegro*)
alexmontenegro@t-com.me

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³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Dan Chiasson, *From the New World: Poems 1976–2014*, by Jorie Graham, *The New Yorker*, 30 March, www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/03/30/beautiful-lies, accessed 8 June 2018.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

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²⁸ *Ibid.*

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