

**To 2040**, by Jorie Graham, Copper Canyon Press, \$25 (hardcover)

Reviewed by Timothy Donnelly

“Are you / still alive there, / reading these words” asks Jorie Graham in her new book, *To 2040*, published less than a year after the appearance of her compilation volume *[To] the Last [Be] Human*, which gathered her four previous titles—*Sea Change*, *Place*, *Fast*, and *Runaway*—under one cover. With increasing intensity, desperation, and strangeness, the poems in this tetralogy confront humankind’s gradual destruction of our home planet and of our cohabitating species (“like spraying weedkiller over all the world’s vegetation”), but even more so, they give shape to the (mostly) human grief, terror, and confusion brought on by what we have done and continue to do on Earth in the time we have left. Graham’s poetry focuses less on the material causes of environmental disaster than on in its felt effects; for instance, while the leading contributor to global warming remains the burning of fossil fuels, the words “oil” and “coal” each appear only twice in *[To] the Last [Be] Human*’s 300 pages, and in the new book, not at all. But the senses’ experience of the crisis (“Un- / natural says the news. Also the body says it”) and the toll it takes on the human psyche, and specifically on the psyche of the poet, whose vocation is to sing (“You have your imagination, says the evening. It is all you have / left, but its neck is open, the throat is / cut” and yet “you have not forgotten how to sing, or to want / to sing”) resounds on every page.

Like all strong poetry, Graham’s is deeply attentive to questions of structure, but equally committed to emergence and discovery. Throughout her writing, even from its earliest days, a scrupulous discernment can be sensed in the arrangement of words on the level of the phrase, the line, the sentence, the strophe, the page, the poem, and the book, but with a gale-force activity of the mind always countervailing her own architecture, like tendrils of an unstoppable vine nearly overtaking the trellis. If the radical interplay of these principles is what generates in Graham’s poetry an almost relentless intensity, it is also what makes it so reliably inviting, calling out to the reader with assurances that the stairs are steep, but the banister is sturdy, or that the road is wild, but wheels won’t fly off.

As with the volumes collected in *[To] the Last [Be] Human*, the poems in *To 2040* (of which there are only 22, including a coda) are arranged in sections of no more than eight poems and sometimes as few as two, with the first section carefully setting stage for the remainder of the book. When the first two poems in *Sea Change*, for example, begin “One day: stronger wind

than anyone expected” (“Sea Change”) and “Deep autumn & the mistake occurs, the plum tree blossoms” (“Embodies”), the reader assembles a sense of context of what follows; even when the poems’ subject matter veers from any explicit engagement with the effects of global warming and moves into other (often more personal) territory, climate disaster casts its shadow over everything the book contains, culminating in its sublime last lines: “there are sounds the planet will always make, even / if there is no one to hear them.”

It is no small thing, then, that *To 2040* opens with a poem titled “Are We,” whose first two words, “extinct yet,” finish the question the title begins. “Are we / extinct yet.” A complex of tones converges in that simple sentence, which doesn’t end in a question mark because it isn’t really asking – it’s telling us how it feels. Over the last fifteen years (*Sea Change* appeared in 2008), Graham’s poetry, which had always been firmly rooted in the real—history, culture, and the natural world—has detached itself from its groundedness (if not completely, then on some deep level) like a tumbleweed and drifted into a plane of speculation, simulation, and apocalypse—or, more accurately, it has been deracinated, forced into a kind of exile from a world that few poets have ever sung as potently, and with only intermittent moments of homecoming.

This transition, perhaps inevitable, may have been underway from the beginning, but with the startling turn toward virtual reality and artificial intelligence in *Fast* (2017) and *Runaway* (2020), there could be no denying that something fundamental had altered, something on par with what Woolf felt shifted in December 1910, when “human nature changed.” The world we constructed has consumed its foundation: nothing coheres: “We need u to / invent god like a razor // and have him slice open / all this nothingness around us.” If the *Errancy* (1997) mourned “some utopia we no longer remember / the terms of,” we now fine ourselves adrift admit a sea of unrealities, countless no places. If, near the end of *Place*, Graham could still write, “I am human I push a little harder,” in *Fast*’s title poem she concludes, “I am not what I asked for.” If, in *Runaway*’s “Tree,” she could write “The VR glasses are not needed yet,” three years later, in *To 2040*, she has capitulated, and the poem “The VR” begins (its title again flowing into the first line) “mask is strapped on now.” This poem, one of the finest in one of the finest and most devastating books of Graham’s career, teases its speaker with a vision of “everything as it should have been.” Fitted with the device, her mouth is clamped “so I can’t bite off / my own tongue / in amazement,” the speaker says, “look, the place where the chemical factory was before the world disappeared / is full of wheat, and doors seem to open / as I approach.” But the system’s kinks have yet to

be worked out, and even in this false paradise of harmony and abundance, human arrogance repeats its old mistakes:

Look it is the scene of  
destruction I think. Something was  
caught here & it  
fought hard here &  
lost. Where is the antagonist. Oh is it  
me I think putting my hand down now  
in the down, in the piles of down, where it  
fought off something like me &  
lost its fight.

Compare “The VR” with the opening poem in Graham’s first book, “The Way Things Work” in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980), and it is startlingly clear that the same voice is speaking to us, although the machines here are simple and analog, not digital, and her faith is still intact:

Wheel, kinetic flow,  
rising and falling water,  
ingots, levers and keys,  
I believe in you,  
cylinder lock, pulley,  
lifting tackle and  
crane lift your small head—  
I believe in you—  
your head is the horizon to  
my hand. I believe  
forever in the hooks.  
The way things work  
is that eventually  
something catches.

The difference in outlook is heartbreaking. And yet, the fortitude at play in Graham’s pursuit, even into its bleakest reaches, continues to offer a kind of encouragement. Humankind has not forgotten how to sing. In an article in *The Guardian* (Dec 1, 2017), Graham is quoted as saying “I am living in the late season, but it has its songs, too. I have to find what they are.”

It is poignant to see that this search has brought Graham back, in *To 2040*, to the shorter lines of her earliest work, although it is certainly true that

short lines have often been tucked in among the longer lines throughout her books, and likewise featured prominently in the title and last poems of *Runaway*, typically in quatrains—as if to hew nearer to the ballad and communal song. And this is the form taken by “Then the Rain,” *To 2040*’s stunning coda, its speaker reaching back to us through time from some speculative future, and from that much closer to our extinction. The poem’s vision is no more or less real than that offered by “The VR,” but rather than rehearsing human vainglory and hubris and the destruction that they yield, “Then the Rain” presents a speaker at first baffled by then basking in a downpour following a long period of drought, guided by her own hands’ instruction to assume a posture of both comfort and remorse, assuring her that Earth isn’t ending, only we are:

I look at them now

with my eyes full of rain,  
and they say hold us up,  
you are not dying  
yet, we are

alive in the death  
of this iteration of  
earth, there will be another  
in which no creatures like us

walk on this  
plateau of years & minutes & grasses &  
roads, a place where  
no memory can form, no memory of

anything, not again, but for now  
the windowpanes shake as the  
harder rain hits  
and the stiff grasses bend over &

the thing which had been a meadow once  
releases a steam,  
& if you listen you can hear  
a faint pulse in it,

a mirage, a release of seeds into the air

where wind insists, & my heavy  
hands which rise now, palms up, shining,  
say to me,

touch, touch it all,  
start with your face,

put your face in us.