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on Jorie Graham

Neile Graham

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Letters" sections deal with work and war, respectively, and the world view is decidedly darker. Human life involves work, conflict, and pain, until our suffering infects even the natural landscape:

All day long the sun has been green out of respect for the dead 
Green and out of shape, 
it has been clucking and shaming what makes it sick. 
People have to eat to fish and work means sweat and things aren't always that pleasant. 

("Sea Turtle")

But Duval reserves his darkest landscapes for "Guerrilla Letters," a section of persona poems that realize the futility of fighting for change, as we 

Happily, Dinner Music avoids despair by closing with the remarkable "Love II" section, where wonder and gratitude have been earned through suffering and a realization of the fragile nature of human love. As the book ends, emptiness is gone, once again replaced by wonder:

After dinner your lips open quietly to the dark passage down inside you. What is all this, this odd food we give away? We eat the other's love and feel amazed and full. 

("Dinner Music")

Reading Dinner Music, we too feel "amazed and full," yet hungry for Duval's next offering. 

—Joseph Martin

Jorie Graham
Erosion
Princeton University Press
Princeton, New Jersey
$6.95 paper

Jorie Graham's second collection of poetry, Erosion, is ambitious and successful. It explores themes of love, beauty, and death with clarity and freshness. Jorie Graham's vision is trustworthy; though she may see things in an unusual way, the certainty of her voice helps her readers enter her vision. Erosion is also a book of the mind—Jorie Graham is not afraid to let her intellect intertwine with the world she perceives. This honest admittance that there is more to human perception than
emotion is refreshing, and makes Erosion a collection that rises far above most contemporary American poetry.

The crispness of Graham’s voice and vision gives her poems authority. Thus she can unite the abstract and concrete in a way that can only enlighten. Take for example the beginning of the poem “In What Manner the Body is United With the Soule”:

Finally I heard
into music,
that is, heard past
the surface tension
which is pleasure, which holds
the self

afloat, miraculous
waterstrider
with no other home.

It is her certainty that makes the metaphor so effective, and helps reader assent to what follows later in the poem—

Of silence, mating striders make
gold eggs
which they will only lay
on feathers
dropped by passing birds
or on the underside
of a bird’s tail
before it wakens and
flies off, blue and white and host
to a freedom

it knows nothing of.

Erosion is ambitious but never pretentious. Its subject is life—in particular the relationship between life and art and the way both mind and emotions understand this. For a lesser poet it would be easy to fall into clichés or melodrama, but Graham does neither. She is fully in control of her subject even when the poem seems to be recreating her own explorations, as in these sections from the poem “Masaccio’s Explosion”

Is this really the failure
of silence,
or eternity, where these two
suffer entrance
into the picture
plane,
a man and woman
so hollowed
by grief they cover
their eyes
in order not to see
the inexhaustible grammer

before them— . . .

. . . I want to say to them,
Take your faces
out of your hands,
look at that bird,
the gift of
the paint— . . .

. . . Whatever they are,
it beats
up through the woods
of their bodies,
almost a light, up
through their fingertips,
their eyes.

There isn’t a price
(that floats up
through their miraculous
bodies

and lingers above them
in the gold air)
that won’t live forever.

Despite the intellectual stance in these poems, or perhaps because of it, there
is an emotional rawness in the poems—life erodes to the sharp rocks of its skeleton.
Art, love, life itself remain. *Erosion* is about this process, Jorie Graham’s vision
and knowledge is unmistakable. The book opens

In this blue light
I can take you there,
snow having made me
a world of bone
seen through to.

Jorie Graham can indeed take you there. She is one of the few major talents emerg­
ing from the mass of contemporary poets. In *Erosion* you will discover the beauty
and power of what remains.

—Neile Graham