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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 “. . . constantly/ fall like the sea, growing old/ and less full.”

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 Exclusion"

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 emerging from the mass of contemporary poets. In *Erosion* you will discover the beauty and power of what remains.

—Neile Graham