

Poetry in the Museum

Jorie Graham

1:30 p.m. • Cleveland Museum of Art – Reid Gallery
11150 East Boulevard



Pulitzer-prize winning poet Jorie Graham will share her work in the dramatic setting of the Reid Gallery at the Cleveland Museum of Art, co-sponsor of this event. Graham is the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University and former Chancellor of the American Academy of Poets. Following her reading and reflections, Graham will announce the winners of the Poetry in the Museum contest, which calls for a descriptive response to a work of art in the CMA collection. Contest winners will read their poems in proximity to described work of art. A book signing with Graham will conclude the event. Support provided by the Helen Buchman Sharnoff Endowed Fund for Poetry at Case Western Reserve University.

SUNDAY 1 **APRIL**

Jorie Graham • Poetry in the Museum

(from poets.org) Jorie Graham was born in New York City in 1950, the daughter of a journalist and a sculptor. She was raised in Rome, Italy and educated in French schools. She studied philosophy at the Sorbonne in Paris before attending New York University as an undergraduate, where she studied filmmaking. She received an MFA in poetry from the University of Iowa.



Graham is the author of numerous collections of poetry, most recently *Sea Change* (Ecco, 2008), *Never* (2002), *Swarm* (2000), and *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974-1994*, which won the 1996 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.

About her work, James Longenbach wrote in the *New York Times*: "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 Rilke or 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 poems."

Graham has also edited two anthologies: *Earth Took of Earth: 100 Great Poems of the English Language* (1996) and *The Best American Poetry 1990*.

Her many honors include a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Fellowship and the Morton Dauwen Zabel Award from The American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

She has taught at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop and is currently the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University. She served as a Chancellor of The Academy of American Poets from 1997 to 2003.

Additional Information for Poetry in the Garden

Ekphrasis: Poetry Confronting Art (from poetry.org)

Ekphrastic poems are understood to focus only on works of art—usually paintings, photographs, or statues.

"Particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there is a good deal of such poetry, addressing a wide range of good and bad, great and obscure, unglossed or overinterpreted works of art, and taking up a range of stances toward their objects," wrote John Hollander in *The Gazer's Spirit*, a collection of ekphrastic poems and the artworks they

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confront. Some of the ways modern poets have faced works of art, Hollander wrote, "include addressing the image, making it speak, speaking of it interpretively, meditating upon the moment of viewing it, and so forth."

For example, both Auden and William Carlos Williams were inspired to write about Pieter Bruegel the Elder's sixteenth-century masterpiece *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. In the painting, the focus is on a farmer plowing his field; meanwhile, in the bottom-right corner of the painting, one can barely see the legs of Icarus as he plunges into the sea. Auden and Williams were drawn to Bruegel's treatment of the Greek myth: how he played down the death of Icarus and instead emphasized the workaday efforts of the farmer. In the poem "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus," Williams wrote:

unsignificantly
off the coast
there was

a splash quite unnoticed
this was
Icarus drowning

Similarly, in "Musée des Beaux Arts," Auden wrote:

In Bruegel's Icarus, for instance: how everything
turns away
Quite leisurely from the disaster, the ploughman may
Have heard the splash, the forsaken cry,
But for him it was not an important failure.



Jorie Graham – poems of ekphrasis



"The Violinist at the Window, 1918" (after Matisse)

Listen to Graham read this poem: [Graham reading](#)

Interview with Jorie Graham

Poetry Magazine
March 2008

[Discussed: "The Violinist at the Window, 1918" from *Sea Change*]

POETRY: Why do the lines look the way they do? Are the lines shaped like thoughts somehow? Is this often the case with your work?

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JORIE GRAHAM: In these poems I am working with lines that acquire momentum as they move down the page, yet need to carry that momentum across shifting distances of breath and attention. They marry the long line of Whitman to the short line of Williams, two poets convinced that their extreme lines — very long, very short—were generative instruments for a music that would explore and enact the idea of, and sensation of, "the democratic experience." Of course these are poems being written at a time when much of what might have been imagined to be "a democracy" has failed. These Utopian poetics are being used to write a poetry that tries to take on board the imagination, and the sensation, of what it might be to have lost the world. The sensation of having no more time, of running out the human clock: what could be, on the face of it, more antithetical to Whitman's and Williams's notions of futurity — however filled with anxiety one often senses them to be (they were no fools). At any rate, I count the whole poem out, line by line, along a graduating accentual motion. Accentual music is more relative than accentual-syllabic music, as in it there is a great deal of prosodic sound (fixed or lexical stress) that is relative to, and drives off of, each preceding stress. Accentual stress — especially as used by Williams—allows for the stressing of words that seldom take stress — conjunctions, articles — in my case this includes word fragments, or syllables. I hope it's evident why the action of creating a structure that foregrounds those terms—the small indicators of connection, presence, the being-there-at-all of them—might seem crucial. A's for lines as such — all lines, it seems to me, aim to create, carry and measure out voice. They generate tone and expectation. Above all, lines and their turns (at each ending) give the reader a place from which to hear the rising and descending modulation of the voice, which is of course modulation of thought and transformation — evolution — of emotion.

P: Can one "get" the poem without having seen the Matisse painting?

JG: Well, the long history of ekphrastic poetry assumes one can, as few such poems are ever printed with an image alongside. Some poets feel the represented image would distract from the poem. I would have loved to have the Matisse painting on the cover of my book, but the Centre Pompidou would not give permission. I have written poems based on paintings in every one of my ten books — from Piero della Francesca to Magritte to Rothko to Richter. At any rate, a painting is, in a poem, a painting run through an imagination and a spirit other than the painter's. It is not trying to describe the painting, it is trying to speak from it.

P: Is the voice in the poem that of the poet, the painter, the violinist? All, none?

JG: Good question. I'll let the reader decide. It certainly shifts, and the predicaments do overlap, now dissonantly, now harmonically.

P: Can you talk about your participation in the presentation of the poem on the page — how you make use of white space, margins, etc.?

JG: My role — participation? — is that I wrote the poem. Like all the others in this book, it is coaxial — to use a phrase coined by a recent reader. It is clear that the portion of the lines on the left-hand side of the central axis are essentially mathematically "identical" in length, in that they occupy the same number of character spaces. I think of the center as a place where the past and the future break from each other, but also where they are married and contend with each other. This is an important subject in the book as a whole. It is hard to extrapolate from a single poem — and "The Violinist" is also somewhat unique in the book. I also read the lines on the left as haikus of a sort — and feel one can read down the left-hand side and find another kind of poem there. Something one cannot do in the middle, nor on the right. These poems are also a series of exploded haikus. One will recognize in their opening, or occasioning, gestures — deep autumn, rising moon — some of the signature openings of haiku. I'd let the reader of the book think about how the form feels. How it works. And why the haiku might be relevant. As always I feel I am writing a book rather than a collection, so speaking about one poem out of context is hard. I might add that by having the indented lines create an internal margin, the poems are expressing the difficulty of taking any beginning-place for granted. It is our very capacity to begin again which is being both broken and renewed at this juncture of our history.

Selected Bibliography for Jorie Graham

Poetry

Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts (Princeton University Press, 1980)

Erosion (1983)

The End of Beauty (Ecco, 1987)

Region of Unlikeness (1991)

Materialism (1993)

The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974-1994 (Ecco, 1995)

The Errancy (1997)

Swarm (2000)

Never (2002)

Sea Change (2008)

Reviews and short essays

"Indigo, Cyanine, Beryl: Review of *Never*" by Helen Vendler. In Jorie Graham, *Essays on the Poetry*. (Ed. Thomas Gardner, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005)

"To Feel and Idea: Review of *Swarm*" by Joanna Klink. In Jorie Graham, *Essays on the Poetry*. (Ed. Thomas Gardner, The University of Wisconsin Press, 2005)

"Jorie Graham's 'New Way of Looking.' " In "*How Poets See the World: the Art of Description in Contemporary Poetry*." (Ed. William Spiegelman, Oxford University Press, 2005)

Jorie Graham, "Some Notes on Silence." In *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*. (Ed. Molly Mcquade, Graywolf Press, 2000)

Useful links for POETRY IN THE GARDEN

This site includes Jorie Graham's extended biography, works, and interviews: <http://joriegraham.com>

Cleveland Museum of Art: www.clevelandart.org

Personal Notes: