

**Where Intellect and Intuition Converge:
Epistemological Errancies in the
Poetry of Jorie Graham**

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(ABSTRACT)

Over the past two decades, American poet Jorie Graham has composed six books of poems. Graham struggles to understand how we make sense of the world through thinking grounded in the logical operations of reason and through thinking that operates as more of a detached wandering that enables direct experiential participation in the present moment—modes of thought occasionally differentiated as “intellect” and “intuition.” Throughout her work, Graham repeatedly experiments with ways to “frustrate” the intellect in order for intuition to wander over an idea while at the same time she relies on the intellect to rescue the mind from directionless wandering. In her early poetry Graham explores ways of defining and describing what it feels like to think. Later, she enacts *thinking* within the lines of her poems, sometimes allegorizing the operation of the intellect and intuition and sometimes provoking readers into an experience of one particular way of thinking through the act of reading.

This study examines Graham’s various successes and failures as she struggles to discover “blossoming” moments of balance between the controlling intellect and the wandering intuition. Beginning with the origins of this line of thinking in Graham’s early work, this study traces the poet’s path of development through each book of poems in order to demonstrate the back and forth momentum shifts of intellect giving way to intuition and intuition being organized by rational thought. Through her epistemological errancies, her wanderings within and without ways of knowing, Graham discovers “blossoming” moments of wholeness where both modes of thought meet “in solution, unsolved.”

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Chapter 1. Introduction

“What is it to understand, she let fly...”

—*Vertigo*

Linguistically dexterous, philosophically complex, Jorie Graham’s poetry makes attempts at articulating what she believes to be inexpressible. For Graham, poetry “is a language for talking about things that cannot really be ‘talked’ about” (Earth x). As a result, she is at times compelled to invent her own poetic language. Over the past two decades, Graham has composed six books of poems: *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* (1980), *Erosion* (1983), *The End of Beauty* (1987), *Region of Unlikeness* (1991), *Materialism* (1993), and *The Errancy* (1997). In 1995 she received a Pulitzer Prize for her selected poems, *The Dream of the Unified Field*. Graham’s work reveals the technical and thematic accomplishments of an evolving poetic mind. Graham herself admits that it has taken her years to scratch at the surface of her complicated epistemological inquiries. Consequently, tracing the development of Graham’s poetics throughout her career sheds light on her recent work by illuminating the maturation of her thinking and its origins in earlier books.

Compelled by the elusiveness of ideas held in language, Graham builds structures out of words only to discover that the essence of her subject echoes in what she is unable to say directly. Graham struggles to understand how we make sense of the world through thinking grounded in the logical operations of reason and through thinking that operates as more of a detached wandering that enables direct experiential participation in the present moment—modes of thought occasionally differentiated as “intellect” and “intuition.” Graham consciously creates metaphors designed to “resist” easy comprehension—a style sometimes criticized as being conceptually difficult. As she explains in her 1987 interview with Thomas Gardner, “a resistant or partially occluded surface compels us to read with a different part of our reading apparatus, a different part of our sensibility. It compels us to use our intuition in reading, frustrates other kinds of reading, the irritable-reaching-after-fact kind. I agree with Stevens’ dictum: ‘the poem must resist the intelligence almost successfully’ ” (99).

Throughout her work, Graham repeatedly experiments with ways to “frustrate” the intellect in order for intuition to wander over an idea while at the same time she relies on the intellect to rescue the mind from directionless wandering. In her early poetry Graham explores ways of defining and describing what it feels like to think. Later, she enacts *thinking* within the lines of her poems, sometimes allegorizing the operation of the intellect and intuition and sometimes provoking readers into an experience of one particular way of thinking through the act of reading. Thus, for Graham, writing as well as reading poetry is a process of discovery that converges both intellectual and intuitive modes of thought. Graham explains this phenomenon in her Introduction to *The Best American Poetry, 1990*: “one could argue that poetry’s difficulty for some readers stems from the very source of its incredible power: the merging of its irrational procedures with the rational nature of language” (xviii). Allowing herself to *think* within a poem, Graham experiences the intellect’s drive to organize and the intuition’s desire to wander around ideas even as she writes about these subjects.

One way of demonstrating Graham's interest in *thinking* is to look at an early poem from *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. "Tennessee June" enacts both rational and intuitive modes of thought in images that Graham will return to again and again throughout her career. "Tennessee June" is definitional ("This is the heat that seeks the flaw in everything / and loves the flaw") but also exploring ("Imagine / your mind wandering without its logic"). The "flaw" "frustrates" the intellect's drive for perfect understanding by forcing it to confront something that, as Graham says, "resists" its reaching. With rational thought momentarily stalled, the mind can wander outside of logic.

As "Tennessee June" begins with a definition of the probing intellect ("This is the heat that seeks the flaw in everything / and loves the flaw"), Graham compares the drive for understanding to a kind of heavy heat, forever inquiring, forever pursuing. What we know of our world results from this constant seeking, but ironically, this seeking must subside at some point in order for things to "illuminate themselves." The desire to understand requires something that resists, something that the intellect cannot collapse. The "flaw," then, is desirable ("loved") because of its ability to "frustrate" the scavenging intellect, allowing the mind to wander in a world outside of structure and logic where "nothing" itself is a presence:

Nothing is heavier than its spirit,
nothing more landlocked than the body within it.
Its daylilies grow overnight, our lawns
bare, then falsely gay, then bare again. Imagine
your mind wandering without its logic,
your body the sides of a riverbed giving in...
In it, no world can survive
having more than its neighbors;
in it, the pressure to become forever less is the pressure
to take forevermore
to get there.

Graham challenges her reader to risk giving up control: "Imagine / your mind wandering without its logic / your body the sides of a riverbed giving in..." Logical understanding erodes in on itself like "the sides of a riverbed giving in"; boundaries collapse and the mind wanders freely. But, the line breaks down with an ellipsis to illustrate the absence of logic. Without the logical structure of language we have no organized system for analysis or expression.

Yet through this collapse, we are *able* to experience that which the intellect seeks. Logic leads to a sense of being "landlocked" by the controlling desire to know a thing definitionally. The establishment of boundaries provides a framework for understanding but limits the actual expression of the subject's essence. "Love" of "the flaw," invites an encounter with the "nothing" that exists outside of logic, control, boundaries. But "the pressure to become forever less" is a slow, "heavy" movement away from rapid logical connections and this pressure unfolds as a process, not a destination, taking "forevermore to get there." Critic Charles Molesworth explains this phenomenon in his essay "Jorie Graham: Living in the World," arguing that opposites such as presence and absence, structure and content, reason and intuition are necessarily entwined with each other:

The process is paradoxical or interlocking (the “less” and the “more” almost playing hide-and-seek with each other), and hence we can derive structure from it. But at the same time the structure, bound up with and by a process that is less teleological than endlessly recursive, can be known only by knowing some other structure: one pressure must answer another, to the point where they are virtually the same, yet fundamentally different. The world passes away inevitably at the same time it persists unendingly. (278)

This both/and feeling in Graham’s work represents her attraction to both rational and intuitive modes of perception. Both are “virtually the same” in their desire to understand the world, “yet fundamentally different” in their approach. We need to “frustrate” logic’s drive *to know* before the mind can “wander”; but we need the logical structure of language in order to explain the feeling of wandering and to continue the poem.

In the second half of the poem Graham seeks a solution for this problem by crossing the boundary and momentarily entering a place “beyond” rational thought. In fact, the stanza break itself intersects a second sentence in which Graham attempts to break into a logic-less “wandering” by trailing off with an ellipsis—but the following stanza pulls her back into the structure of the poem. In a move echoing Walt Whitman’s “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” Graham mimics the tension between this back and forth motion within the lines of her poem. Like Whitman’s lines that imitate the very sensation of rocking the poem describes thematically, Graham pairs rocking imagery and the rocking rhythm of the line to underscore the gentle swaying motion that provides an entrance into this otherness while still maintaining a foothold in the structure of language:

Oh

let it touch you...
The porch is sharply lit—little box of the body—
and the hammock swings out easily over its edge.
Beyond the hot ferns bed, and fireflies gauze
the fat tobacco slums,
the crickets boring holes into the heat the crickets fill.
Rock out into the dark and back to where
the blind moths circle, circle,
back and forth from the bone-white house to the creepers unbraiding.
Nothing will catch you.
Nothing will let you go.

Rocking phrases such as “Rock out...and back,” “circle, circle,” “back and forth,” and even parallel lines like “Nothing will catch you / Nothing will let you go” at once perform the movement the poem describes as well as create a comforting sensation to sooth the anxiety associated with “the mind wandering without its logic.”

Being grounded in the light of logic allows Graham to safely move into the darkness of unbounded space and still be able to describe or understand the process. While the rhythm

Whitman's rocking resonates in these lines, Graham's sense of rocking back and forth between the tight structure of the "bone-white house" to the loosening boundaries of the "creepers unbraiding" also recalls Robert Frost's image of swinging out into formless space in his poem "Birches." For Graham, "the hammock [that] swings out easily over its edge" is like Frost's swinging on Birch branches "*Toward* heaven" but never landing firmly *in* heaven. The ability to be brought back to a place of stability is instrumental to the success of the swinging, as Frost admits: "That would be good both going and coming back." Curiously, though, while this "open" place to be rocked out to is considered "dark," the moths in Graham's light of logic are "blind" and turning in endless circles around an artificial light suggesting that individually both places provide only partial knowledge. Logic can only get us so far, yet it is necessary to achieve the degree of understanding of which we *are* capable—the rocking back is as necessary as the rocking out.

To convey a sense of what exists outside of logic, Graham relies on negations, allowing the vastness of open, unbounded spaces to exist in terms of absences. She explains her use of the term "nothing" as meaning "the alternative shape, something which perhaps is centrifugal, something which we don't identify primarily by its limits" (An Interview 79). Resisting her own will to control by naming (and thus, containing) her subject, Graham describes the heat by what it is not: "Nothing is heavier than its spirit, / nothing more landlocked than the body within it." Attributing to "nothing" a heaviness and a "body" inside it again unites opposites to achieve what Molesworth describes as the "virtually the same, yet fundamentally different" quality of spirit and matter existing together. An experience of the "nothing" comes as a result of relinquishing logical control of the subject and entering an "open" place where "Nothing will catch you. / Nothing will let you go." The repetition of the word "nothing" at both the beginning and end of this short poem frames the feelings of "wandering" and even seems to mimic the lawn's appearance of being "bare, then falsely gay, then bare again." The "nothing," Graham suggests, surrounds the "falsely gay" boundaries we construct for ourselves, and accepting the challenge of "wandering without...logic" draws us into this "bare" place of "forever less."

Graham's use of "nothing" as a subject in this poem echoes Wallace Stevens' sense of "the nothing" in his poem "The Snow Man." Stevens' poem explores the state of mind necessary "To regard" and "To behold" the emptiness in a winter landscape and yet "not to think" with the rational engagement that these infinitives suggest. Having "a mind of winter" provides a sense of total immersion in open space: "For the listener, who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." Stevens' poem allows absence, emptiness, "the nothing" to exist without being controlled, limited. In fact, in this passage, "nothing" progresses from emptiness to presence. Void of logical organizing thought, the listener in the snow is "nothing" whereas the second "Nothing" is capitalized, signifying a sense of *something*, though not present in this scene. The final "nothing" is all subject: *the* "nothing." By the end of this progression "nothing," emptiness becomes a full presence itself in the field and in the poem. The line closes with a present tense verb, "is," to connote the unbounded immediacy of the experience.

Graham, too, engages the "nothing" through a "wandering" mind, but like Stevens, she is at once limited by the structure of language and held secure by it. After all, these so-called limitations are also the means through which we can articulate an experience of the "nothing,"

and Graham is driven to represent this balance within her poetry. Stevens poem ends with what Graham might consider to be an exposed vulnerability. The listener is wholly absorbed by nothingness without any discernable way of returning to an organizing mode of thought. Though she longs to have this nothingness “catch” her, she also expects it to “let [her] go.”

One way of understanding Graham’s ideas about thinking in “Tennessee June” may be to look at another Stevens poem that contemplates human thinking differently from “The Snow Man.” In “Anecdote Of The Jar” Stevens considers the ways in which the rational mind organizes the chaos of what it cannot grasp in terms of something different, something recognizable. The jar, this flaw in the natural scene, operates as a kind of material simile, taking “dominion everywhere” because it is “like nothing else in Tennessee.” In this case, the jar is a kind of “flaw” in the wilderness; it represents a boundary, an internal frame for dividing and controlling the confusing “slovenly wilderness.” Unframed space “frustrates” the mind’s ceaseless desire to organize—without a focal point nothing exists for the mind to “catch” on, for it to generate context and perspective. In “The Snow Man” the narrator experiences “the nothing” exclusively through total immersion in the landscape; in “Anecdote of the Jar” the narrator makes sense of the landscape from a distance, understanding it in terms of what it is not; in “Tennessee June” Graham “rocks” back and forth between immersion and distance as she swings through logic’s attempts at organization to arrive at a place where Stevens’ idea of “dominion” and Graham’s “wandering” meet.

In the final lines of “Tennessee June” Graham coins the term “blossoming” to describe her experience of holding both the logical intellect and the wandering intuition in harmony: “We call it blossoming— / the spirit breaks from you and you remain.” “Blossoming,” the golden moment that Graham continuously tries to recreate and understand, allows for the spirit to wander outside of the structure of the body while the body, “you,” remains structurally intact. This peaceful coexistence of opposite modes of thought represents for Graham the most fulfilling experience of thinking. In fact, this kind of “blossoming” interdependence points to Yeats’ own idea of “blossoming” in the final movement of “Among School Children” where the dancer and the dance are separate yet united in the “dancing”:

Labour is blossoming or dancing where
The body is not bruised to pleasure soul,
Nor beauty born out of its own despair,
Nor blear-eyed wisdom out of midnight oil.
O chestnut tree, great rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

In this short passage, Yeats considers the impossibility of differentiating endings from beginnings, form from content. The “blossoming” tree is as much a function of the leaf as it is of the tree trunk just as the “dancing” is entwined with both the body of the dancer and the dance itself. The present participle verb tense for both Yeats and Graham suggests that “blossoming” is an act, an experience, that exists in the convergence of the dancer and the dance—for Graham,

the intellect and the intuition. “Blossoming” is born out of the balance of tension created by the pull of these two poles.

Graham’s efforts to recover a sense of “blossoming” evolve as she refines her poetic ability. In each book she mines her previous work for ideas that “resist” her thinking. This study examines Graham’s various successes and failures as she struggles to discover “blossoming” moments of balance between the controlling intellect and the wandering intuition. Beginning with the origins of this line of thinking in Graham’s early work, this study attempts to trace the poet’s path of development through each subsequent volume. In doing so I hope to demonstrate the back and forth momentum shifts of intellect giving way to intuition and intuition being organized by rational thought. Within the interplay of these modes of thought exists, for Graham, the means by which we know and make sense of our world. Also, I hope to illustrate that while Graham’s poetic theories are in constant flux, there is a linear progression of thought that allows for—even cries out for—a sequential reading of the texts.

Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts finds Graham first beginning to name and define the problem. Here, Graham seems to emphasize separation—between the intellect and intuition, the material and the spiritual, language and ideas. In *Erosion* Graham searches for ways to combine the two modes of thought, locating the “blossoming” in a present tense engagement with thinking—something referred to in this book as “entering. But “entering” necessarily leads towards exiting or closure, the implications of which lead Graham into her next book. *The End of Beauty* marks a break in Graham’s poetic style. Her previous attempts at understanding modes of thought are now more directly enacted within the poems both thematically and structurally. Graham explores the pull towards closure, finding the “blossoming” in the moment just before the narrative is set in motion and then watching as the action unfolds. Here, Graham foregrounds the reader’s participation in the process of shaping ideas, and she makes repeated attempts at demonstrating how *thinking* can become stuck in a wandering phase or become overpowered by the forward rush of the narrative. *Region of Unlikeness*, on the other hand, pauses the motion of narrative in an attempt to sustain the present moment. In this book, immobilism attracts Graham in the same way that the pull towards closure previously interested her. By the time she writes *Materialism*, Graham has explored the process of *thinking* from multiple perspectives, and now she combines her experience to describe the ways separation, “entering,” the rush towards closure, and immobilism, work in the material world around her. In *Materialism* Graham experiences “blossoming” through her failed attempts at description: she momentarily tries to know her subject by holding it through the act of description and then she lets it go. Finally, in her most recent work Graham continues to search for the “blossoming” moment when rational and intuitive thought meet. A book that tries to know unnamable presences through negation, *The Errancy* seems resigned to the inability of language to articulate the “blossoming” moment and instead seeks alternative ways of representing intangibles within structured language.

Critics largely find Graham’s poetry difficult to pin to any descriptive label. Her work is at times referred to as “Philosophic poetry,” “Post-‘Metaphysical’ Metaphysical poetry,” and “Language poetry.” Willard Spiegelman has recently defined Graham as “a troubling, daring, even a heroic” poet. Charles Molesworth observes that “Graham’s poetry cannot be easily categorized as purely postmodern or confessional, feminist or faddish,” concluding that Graham simply “writes poetry that matters” (277, 283). Condensing the sense of Graham’s elusiveness,

James Langenback asserts that “Jorie Graham is as frustrating and problematic a poet—I mean this as the highest complement—as Eliot or Frost” and as a result, he concludes that she is “many different poets in one” (163, 176). Because Graham’s subject matter, the operations of thought and perception, evades reductive analysis, critical exegesis can be as abstract as the poetry itself.

Helen Vendler has given significant critical attention to Graham’s work, publishing four books each with chapters devoted to Graham. Interested in the metaphysical aspects of the poetry, Vendler argues that “Graham’s deepest subject is how to represent the unboundedness and intensity of aspiration as it extends itself to fullest self-reflexivity with ample awareness of its own creative powers” (*The Given* 93). She sees Graham’s early work as being a “delicate and steady transgression in which the spirit searches the flesh and the flesh the spirit, melting and dissolving the boundaries thought to separate them” (*The Music* 455). But in her book *The Breaking of Style* (1995), Vendler notices a shift in Graham’s poetry beginning with *The End of Beauty* where Graham first extends the length of her lines, sentences, and pauses, enacting “the luxurious spread of experienced being, preanalytic and precontingent” (84). Thus, for Vendler, Graham’s poetry is a blending of spirituality and materiality as the self (and the poetry) is continually being constructed.

Thomas Gardner, too, explores Graham’s representation of the visible and the invisible in language, something he sees as being at first “explicated” in the early work and then “enacted” in *The End of Beauty* and later works. In his 1987 essay “Accurate Failures: The Work of Jorie Graham” Gardner argues that what Graham “tries to think through in [*Erosion* and *The End of Beauty*] is how, by remaining within and exploiting the built-in limitations of language, one might develop a shadow version, a negative, of what can’t be presented directly” (3). He sees an evolved version of Graham’s attention to language’s limitations in *Materialism* where Graham uses description as an “acknowledgement of limits generating both a shattering of language and an awareness of what blazes against those markings and is gone” (*Suffering* 1). In other words, according to Gardner, Graham’s poetry follows a line of questioning which continually asks “whether we can both acknowledge our distance from words and use that distance to think with” (2). Focusing on Graham’s attention to the “gap” between words and objects, Gardner examines the dramas of “failed” language enacted in the poetry.

Among the critics responding to Graham’s early work, Bonnie Costello sees Modernistic qualities in Graham’s poetry that for her reflect an overarching unity in the early books. In her 1992 essay “Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion” Costello argues that “While ordered around a passion for mystery, the poems themselves aspire to the unity and completeness of an artifact rather than the residue of a process. Whatever twists of thought may arise in the poems end in a tied, integrated imagery, a tense unity” (373). And she criticizes later books as being postmodern in their decentralized focus “wrested from chaos rather than preserved in sequestered icons” (375). But other critics disagree with Costello and view Graham’s later work as more representative of her maturing poetic dexterity. James Longenback, for instance, in his book *Modern Poetry After Modernism* (1997), argues that contradictions in Graham’s work are the source of her “distinctive power,” and further asserts that “Especially since the publication of *Materialism*, it has become clear that Graham’s poetry reaches in too many different directions to be accounted for by any linear narrative” (162-3). Like Vendler and Gardner, Longenback

finds Graham enacting “dramas of consciousness” that involve “complexities and unresolved tensions” in the composition of the self (170).

More recently critics are focusing on Graham’s disinclination to remain fixed, as Costello believes her to be, on “the visual icon...infinitely deep, yet centered” (373). For example, Willard Spiegelman argues that Graham breaks with tradition and has “reimagined the very transactions between the poet’s eye and the visible world. Whereas the major tradition of poetic description has meant keeping one’s sight steadily upon one’s subject...Graham has alighted upon a new vantage point; refusing to look evenly and patiently, she veers nervously, cross-cutting from one item, gesture, scene, or thought, to another” (244). Also challenging Costello’s claim that Graham’s early work privileges the visual icon over process, Charles Molesworth argues that in all her books Graham “removes detail in order to reveal process” (278). Both critics are interested, however, in the ways Graham strives to make sense of the world.

The critical response to Graham’s work acknowledges the philosophical leanings in her poetry, but few—if any—critics delve into the way Graham literally enacts *thinking* on the page. Graham pushes the limits of rational inquiry and intuitive exploration, seeking a sense of what language can reveal about the limits of human knowledge or the ability to articulate that knowledge. This study considers Graham’s metaphysical questionings that probe at the boundaries between matter and spirit, as Vendler points out, but it goes on to examine the epistemological implications of these questions: how do our modes of thought enable us to know the visible and invisible worlds. The language limitations on which Gardner focuses reveal one aspect of Graham’s attempts at understanding the world, but the meeting of intellectual and intuitive modes of thought in a moment of “blossoming” imparts an experience of consciousness that at once transcends language even as it is captured in the language of the poem. I follow the metamorphosis of this dynamic over the course of Graham’s ongoing poetic career as she shapes, releases, then returns to her questions again and again.

Chapter 2. Rocking Back and Forth

“finding the way
from there to here,
and finding the way to lose it.”
—*Cross-Stitch*

Jorie Graham’s first volume of poetry, *Hybrids of Plants and Ghosts*, is primarily concerned with explaining what it feels like to think. Graham values rational thinking yet also explores the necessity of quieting rational intellect to allow intuition to wander. The title of her book, adapted from Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, bespeaks a mixture of opposites—matter and spirit. The epigraph from Nietzsche (“But he who is wisest among you, he also is only a discord and hybrid of plant and of ghost”) further illuminates the “discord” or conflict created as a result of this combination, and when considered in terms of the poems, it suggests the tension between these two distinctly diametrical modes of thought.

Organizing the book into four sections allows Graham to explore her subject from multiple perspectives—each section groups poems taking a similar approach to the act of thinking. In fact, Graham remains committed to seeking new entrances into her subject throughout *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. She revisits the same problem again and again varying her perspectives, metaphors, and tone so that the end result is a thorough investigation into the human desire for understanding. For example, while poems like “Tennessee June” in section I name and define, Sections II and III both contain poems that examine the intellect and intuition from opposite perspectives. “Harvest for Bergson” in Section II follows the wandering mind on a moonlit night and “On Why I Would Betray You” in Section III explores the intellect’s temptation to explain its knowledge of the world with orderly white lies. Finally, section IV includes poems that contain slow, lazy images contributing the “heavy” feel of being pregnant with thought.

Graham begins *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* by pondering the processes of human thinking in “The Way Things Work,” a poem that presents the multiple ways ideas “hook” together. In this poem Graham proposes that thinking is an act of the intellect focusing on “objects of desire” and also an act of the intuition believing in “objects of faith.” She unfolds these ideas further:

The way things work
is by solution,
resistance lessened or
increased and taken
advantage of.
The way things work
is that we finally believe
they are there,
common and able
to illustrate themselves.

Intellect pursues an idea by pushing against places of “resistance” and controls this pursuit by taking advantage of resistance, probing for a “solution.” However, Graham notes that when this pursuit subsides, things are “able / to illustrate themselves” “without us.” Relying on faith more so than reason, Graham surrenders control, resolving that “eventually something catches” even without—or maybe in spite of—her probing. Spiegelman observes that “the poem ends on a note of resignation to almost random chance” (249). But for Graham “random chance” (in later books appearing in terms such as “the useless,” “accidental,” and “for no reason”) allows an idea to “open” in the same way that pattern or organization can close an idea by locking it within boundaries. Central for Graham, then, is her project of finding ways to quiet the intellect’s will to control so things *can* “illustrate themselves.”

In “Harvest for Bergson” Graham engages these seemingly impenetrable boundaries imposed by rational thought, applying French philosopher and 1927 Nobel Prize laureate Henri Bergson’s ideas concerning the contrast between the intellect and intuition to frame her poem. In his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1903) Bergson argues that knowledge of the world is cultivated more through the intuition than through rational, analytical investigation. “From intuition one

can pass to analysis,” Bergson writes, “but not from analysis to intuition” (42). In the Editor’s Introduction to *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Thomas Goudge explicates Bergson’s argument:

The discussion opens with a contrast between the two ways of knowing anything. The first is characteristic of the intellect which approaches the thing externally from some point of view alien to it, uses symbols to express its findings, and yields knowledge that is relative. The second is the process of intuition, whereby we “enter into” the thing and identify ourselves with it by a kind of “intellectual sympathy”...Bergson insists that we must not confuse intuition with mere feeling or emotion...Intuition is rather an act, or a series of acts, of direct participation in the immediacy of experience. (11-12)

For Graham, “Rocking out into that dark” in “Tennessee June” or “peer[ing] out over / the moonlit walls” in “Harvest for Bergson” is like Bergson’s ideas of intuition engaging the “immediacy of experience.”

“Harvest for Bergson” explores this perspective, illustrating the intellect’s “tragic” desire to “see it all” by constructing boundaries to keep the blurry moonlight of “nothing” at bay. The poem begins by revisiting the blind moths who circle in the light of rational thought in “Tennessee June” and are now “trapped” with Graham in a place where logic erodes into images of the “nothing” suggested by the openness of intuitive thought:

Last night I watched the harvest moonrise. There were moths
trapped in with me. Here they tap like fingertips
On walls and windowpanes. For moonlight
blurs the facts,

its shade not keen or rational like that of sunlight
seeking to capture the nature of its subject;
it seeks, rather, to let it go,
to show what it is not...

For Graham, sunlight is like the human desire to know, to illuminate edges and place fixed boundaries around a subject in order to establish fact while moonlight is more blurry and mysterious. When the intellect is “frustrated” by resistance, “tap[ing] like fingertips / On walls and windowpanes,” intuition can wander. Just as in “Tennessee June” Graham suggests that this way of thinking doesn’t try to “capture” a thing, “rather, it seeks to let it go.” Again Graham represents this shift towards the intuitive with her ellipsis, implying, in Bergson’s terminology, a move away from the symbolic, the rational.

However, this move suspends the progress of the poem, and to restart it Graham swings back into structure with a discussion of the less elusive intellect. After all, this poem is as much about Bergson’s concept of the intellect’s desire for symbolic expression through the construction of boundaries as it is about his “intellectual sympathy.” For, in order to represent intuition’s participation in the “immediacy of experience” (Bergson’s “intellectual sympathy”) she must show what it is not:

because it is what is not animal in us, the best intentions we
we still have
at the moment of perception: to see it all.
Then we grow hot, tragic and fleshed
with intellect,

dividing. The world we live in
is going to change, to more than disappear.
This is the light that blinds you by degrees
that it may always feel like sight.

Graham, aware of Bergson's observation "The eye sees only what the mind is prepared to comprehend," recognizes that this kind of seeing is "relative" at best. Again using the technique of defining her subject in terms of "what it is not," Graham uses negation to symbolically represent what resists naming. Resistant to narrowing her perspective through rigid definition, Graham takes a multifaceted approach to her subject, dismantling her images and ideas as quickly as she constructs them. Parallel sentence constructions in "Tennessee June" ("This is the heat that seeks the flaw in everything / and loves the flaw") and "Harvest for Bergson" ("This is the light that blinds you by degrees / that it may always feel like sight") draw contrasts in the intellectual mode of perception. The loving heat of intellect is also "tragic"; the same light that allows for rational sight is also blinding. Still, Graham seems to be deliberately ambiguous with her pronouns: is the light that blinds by degrees "rational like sunlight" or does it "blur the facts" like moonlight. Ironically, both make logical sense, and perhaps Graham blurs boundaries between her subjects in an effort to make evident the general fallibility of sight. As a result, shadows of Bergson's ideas regarding the limitations of sight and our circumscribed capacity to understand exist throughout this poem.

Graham concludes "Harvest for Bergson" with multiple images of enclosed, bounded spaces that leave the poem with an almost claustrophobic tone. The swaying motion that feels so liberating in "Tennessee June" here lulls the reader into a defensive sleep. The medieval city walls divide inner world from outer as the latter becomes less and less a place of human dominion:

and if the foreground sways
it isn't to awaken us, ever so gently; no, it means for us
to go

to sleep, perspective drawing in like peasants gathering
within the city walls
when war is imminent. The distance, its fields,
growing baroque, then wild

then dry. And those that squinting, will peer out over
the moonlit walls tonight,
can't quite make out the empty fields, which one
is theirs; it slips their mind...

The disintegration of organization is represented in a shift from the ornate to the bare: “the fields, / growing baroque, then wild / then dry” until they are finally “empty” and indistinguishable from one another. The passage itself dramatizes the anxiety over the surrender of intellectual control involved in the movement into emptiness, the “nothing.” This line also finds a structural parallel in “Tennessee June”: “our lawns / bare, then falsely gay, then bare again.” The inversion of this image in “Harvest for Bergson” creates an atmosphere of foreboding where “war is imminent” and death the result of enclosure behind “walls.” The establishment of such a severe boundary again contrasts the spaciousness of “Tennessee June” whose openness creates a sense of freedom, or “blossoming,” where “the spirit breaks from you and you remain.” The reflection of “Tennessee June” in “Harvest for Bergson” mimics Graham’s theme as well. Moonlight, is, after all, reflected sunlight. Reflections or perhaps shadows of the summer-like quality of “Tennessee June” can be seen in the moonlight of “Harvest for Bergson” as well as in later poems such as the wintry “On Why I Would Betray You.”

The final enigmatic line “This is what dies / not in duration / but in time” returns to Bergson and his ideas that endorse the uninterrupted flow of continuous time—for Bergson, “duration” (*duree*)—over mechanized clock-time as described in *Time and Free Will* (1889). Bergson argues against the distribution of time into single measurable moments, proposing instead the notion of time as one continuous process. Time itself is measured according to the eternal cycles of the sun and moon. The work of the intellect “dividing” time into seconds, minutes and hours imposes boundaries that lead to the death of the timeless moment and conscious participation in the “immediacy of experience” as perceived by the intuition. Responding to Bergson’s ideas almost a century later, Graham depicts us as existing behind a self-imposed barricade of reason, “trapped” by division and analysis. We continue to rely on sight as we “squint” and “peer out” beyond these boundaries. Yet her attitude is encouraging inasmuch as the peasants in the poem *do* “peer” into the emptiness with a wonder that enables the mind to “slip” into the “nothing” that can be glimpsed through intuitive thought but not sustained by reason. It is this “slip,” or wandering, that “dies” in Bergson’s mechanized time even as it survives in the “duration” of continuous time.

For Graham, constructing boundaries is necessary for human understanding and as such is neither positive nor negative – or inversely, the boundaries constructed are at once beneficial and restrictive. “Harvest for Bergson” depicts this paradox with the walls that barricade us from the world yet are created from our “best intentions.” Similarly, in “On Why I Would Betray You” Graham seeks the beauty in the human desire to understand, looking again at the controlling intellect, although here she admits her own complicity in the intellect’s drive to make “truth”:

Because this is the way our world goes under: white lies,
the snow
each flake a single instance of
nostalgia. Before you know it
everything you’ve said
is true. The flakes

nest in the flaws, the hairline cracks, the stubs

where branches
snapped—only unbroken lines, unwavering,
for building on. How easily our tracks
are filled. How easily
we are undone,

Seeking to avoid the anxiety that accompanies the “frustrated” intellect when it encounters resistance or “flaws,” Graham demonstrates how easy it is to simply cover imperfections in order to achieve “only unbroken lines, unwavering / for building on”—ideas that the intellect can conveniently understand and assimilate. These “white lies,” these comfortable explanations are at first almost imperceptible, gradually building on each other so that “you” have fabricated a definition of “truth” “Before you know it.” The multiple referents for this ambiguous “it” illustrate the Graham’s apprehension over these “white lies.” The “it” at once suggests that “white lies” pile up before you realize what is happening, but “it” also refers to “truth,” implying that “everything you’ve said / is true” before you “know” truth itself. The danger with “easy” solutions, for Graham, is that they tend to obscure rather than reveal “truth.”

But the emphasis in “On Why I Would Betray You” rests on Graham’s struggle with her temptation to yield to the intellect’s betrayal of truth. This word, “betray,” though, brings with it multiple layers of meaning. A betrayal not only involves the disruption of what is anticipated – it also carries with it a sense of revelation, the divulging of information that would not ordinarily have been noticed. Graham defines her role, “What I do / in betrayal / ...is alter the rules / in the pattern” but here, she also gives “betrayal” a different spin. If the intellect “betrays” truth by covering it with “white lies,” Graham “betrays” the intellect by revealing its secrets. As Graham explores in poems throughout *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, the intellect is compulsively involved in carving out a kind of pattern for understanding. Yet, this constant pursuit of pattern is the “way we are undone,” blinding us in the same way as the moths in “Tennessee June” and “Harvest for Bergson” are blinded by the light of the intellect’s searching. As a poet, though, Graham’s business is also to “betray” her reader’s logical expectations. By disrupting expectations of pattern, Graham mutes the intellectual pursuit of an anticipated outcome so that the reader’s mind might for an instant “wander without its logic.” Interrupting the drive to understand future (“What will happen”) and past (“what happened”), Graham “betrays” the intellect’s “faithlessness.”

Compelled by the multiplicity of perspective, Graham builds on images from “Tennessee June” that she revisits in “Harvest for Bergson” and again revises and examines in “On Why I Would Betray You.” For example, the heat “that loves the flaw” now appears as a love of flawlessness:

Who wouldn’t love to render
her white lies to their flawlessness like this,
in brushstrokes
dagger true,

yet kind. For is it not true, this smooth new skin,
were we not also good? Each indiscretion
a cares of faithlessness,
a feather to touch you by.

Graham's image of the intellect as a lover of flaws in "Tennessee June" represented as a searching summer heat now shifts into wintry imagery where the intellect as a lover of perfection becomes like snow masking the flaws, making everything the same. But unlike the work of "faith" Graham describes in "The Way Things Work," the "white lies" of "single" explanation are a "caress of faithlessness" that bury truths instead of allowing them to "illuminate themselves."¹ Here the paradox of human thinking exists in our simultaneous desires to pursue both the flaw and the perfection. The "kind" intention to understand exists along with "dagger"-like qualities of the intellect, dividing, cutting, and killing its subject with analysis.

Anticipating yet slowing the book's approaching conclusion, Graham balances the eager, analytical tone of Section I with a more heavy, lingering tone in Section IV. The poems of this section feel weighted with the progress towards conclusion perhaps in an effort to delay closure of this volume. This idea extends Graham's perspectives from the previous section. Approaching the thing we wish to understand (and through understanding, to own), she hesitates, attempting to linger in the moment between desire and desire fulfilled. Hence, Graham's poems throughout this last section rely on thick, sluggish imagery to convey a sense of delay. "Over and Over Stitch" begins with the lines "Late in the season the world digs in, the fat blossoms / hold still for just a moment longer. / Nothing looks satisfied." Likewise, "The Slow Sounding and Eventual Reemergence Of" is a poem pregnant with anticipation of what is to come though "you are willing / to wait forever" for it to arrive. "The Nature of Evidence" opens with the line "In winter the onset of day lingers all day" while the next poem, "Mind," begins with an image of "the slow overture of rain." Having defined, examined, and re-examined various modes of thought and the desire to understand, Graham's seems to suspend her reaching, and having pursued her subject from any number of positions, she slows as she comes close to "owning" her subject and ending the book.

However, Graham closes with "A Feather for Voltaire," a light poem unlike any other in this final section. Contemplating language, Graham ends the poem and the book with a sense of emptiness:

A feather,
pulled from the body or found on the snow
can be dipped into ink
to make one or more words: *possessive, the sun*. A pen
can get drunk,
having come so far, having so far to go—*meadow,*
in vain, imagine
the pain
and when he was gone then there was none

and this is the key to the kingdom.

¹ In her 1992 essay "Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion" Bonnie Costello glosses the "white lie" found in *Erosion's* "The Lady and the Unicorn and Other Tapestries": "white because of its benevolence, a lie because its orders to not represent the realities of erosion" (382). Though her context relates directly to this specific poem, I think her reading can also be applied to the "white lie" from "On Why I Would Betray You." It is "kind" because it allows us to make definitive sense of the world but a "lie" because it accommodates only one version of the truth.

The two groups of words that Graham “makes” are associated with the distance that she perceives she still must cross. Words connoting control and rational illumination, “*possessive, the sun,*” represent the intellect and are formed by a pen carefully “dipped” in ink. On the other hand, words connoting randomness and wandering, “*meadow, / in vain, imagine / the pain,*” represent the intuition and are formed by a “drunk” pen. The realization of “having come so far, having so far to go” gives the poet more perspectives to explore, the heat of intellect more problems to pursue. But the poem ends with a sense of absence: “when he was gone then there was none,” perhaps suggesting that emptiness or the “nothing” is the “key to the kingdom.” However, the ambiguity of the vague pronoun, “this,” itself resists the intellect’s desire to name and define, “frustrating” the intellect while the intuition wanders over the idea behind the words. The poem ends by combining both modes of thought: the rational construction of language and the speculative contemplation of the distance between words and their meaning. And with that thought, Graham lifts the reader back into the struggle of language, back into the making of meaning, ultimately circling back towards the feeling of “faith” that opens this same volume—understanding comes when things finally “illuminate themselves.”

Chapter 3. Erosion’s Solution, Unsolved

“there is no
entrance,
only entering.”

—At Luca Signorelli’s *Resurrection of the Body*

The title of Graham’s second book, *Erosion* (1983), metaphorically describes her movement away from *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. Where the earlier book followed the back and forth motion of the intellect becoming “frustrated” enabling the intuition to “wander,” *Erosion* focuses more specifically on the “entering” itself and closely examines the role of vision in the interplay of intellect and intuition. Understanding, according to Graham, is a process, an “entering,” and she prefers the present participle to signify uninterrupted motion rather than the more fixed, stable noun, “entrance.” To borrow Graham’s own image from “Tennessee June,” “like the sides of a riverbed giving in,” *Erosion* unearths the layer underneath *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, arrived at only through the gradual wearing away of its surface over time.

Heraclitus observes that one cannot step into the same river twice because the forward motion of time gives rise to a river that is in constant flux (367). Graham responds to Heraclitus directly and indirectly throughout her work, continually revising herself, so that over time she cannot step into the same idea in the same way twice, a process she describes in “Wanting a Child,” one of many poems containing the river image:

How hard it is for the river here to re-enter
the sea, though it’s most beautiful, of course, in the waste
of time where it’s almost turned back. Then
it’s yoked,
trussed....The river
has been everywhere, imagine, dividing, discerning,

cutting deep into the parent rock,
scouring and scouring
its own bed.
Nothing is whole
where it has been. Nothing
remains unsaid.

Scouring past poems, her “parent rock,” Graham excavates ideas embedded in her previous work, but the progressive movement of time causes her to approach these ideas differently. “For me, each book is a critique of the previous,” Graham states (82). Recalling the “catch as catch can” randomness from “The Way Things Work,” the poem begins by associating “the beautiful” with “the waste of time.” For Graham, ideas are most alive *before* they are “yoked” and made useful by the intellect. This metaphor of a “yoked” idea brings forth images of exertion and drudgery—animals laboring to cultivate a field are “yoked,” harnessed to equipment, and forced to work for someone. In *Erosion* Graham struggles against language’s tendency make the “beautiful” useful even as she “yokes” ideas from her past work.

One “yoked” idea Graham imports from *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* is her affinity for the “Nothing.” Swirling with ambiguity, the “Nothing” in this poem operates on multiple levels. In terms of the revision of the previous book, Graham suggests that ideas have been left in fragments (“Nothing is whole / where it has been. Nothing”) and also implies a sense of language’s overkill where words are piled upon a thing through description (“Nothing / remains unsaid.”). But when considered as a *subject* rather than a negation, “Nothing,” Graham seems to say, exists intact and undisturbed perhaps *because* it “remains unsaid,” and untouched by language. Graham furthers this sense of wholeness and continuity in the layout of the lines:

Nothing is whole
where it has been. Nothing

Repetition of the word “Nothing” brackets the word “whole” on the page. The white space on the page draws the reader’s eye towards the second “Nothing,” completing the frame. In a move that seems to evolve from “Tennessee June” (“our lawns / bare then falsely gay, then bare again”; the repetition of “Nothing” that frames the whole poem), the “Nothing”—boundaryless, open space—surrounds the “whole”—contained, enclosed space. Moreover, the enjambment of the line “Nothing / remains unsaid” pulls the reader’s eye down the page and allows “Nothing” itself to exist in a fluid, unfixed position in the poem. Thus, Graham literally demonstrates the revision process she describes by “scouring [her] own bed” of ideas from *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* and developing their subtleties and complexities within the new poems.

In *Erosion* Graham continues to explore human understanding, but whereas in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* she “frustrated” intellect so that things could “illuminate themselves,” here she begins to experiment with holding both intellect and intuition together: “If I have a faith it is something like this: this ordering / of images / within an atmosphere that will receive them, hold them / in solution, unsolved.” Graham seems to shift directions away from the pursuit of an answer, as so many poems in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* attempted to provide, towards more of a suspension of multiple ways of thinking (a concept she will explore with even more

detail in *The End of Beauty*). This multiplicity is best expressed in the apparent contradiction of “In solution, unsolved.” Here, Graham creates an image that suggests both the mixture of unlike things and the ability to hold them together without changing their uniqueness. The paradox, however, is embedded within the nuances of the particular words. “Solution” and “unsolved” at once point towards the rational sciences with the image of a chemical solution as well as to the mysterious where easy answers (“solutions”) provide no clarity and conclusions conclude nothing. Graham’s “solution” of collected poems in *Erosion* offers no “solution” to the complex questions that they raise. Focusing on processes rather than endings or answers, Graham experiments with “entering” the tension between unlike ideas without feeling compelled to explain what happens next.

One particular angle Graham develops for “entering” this tension is through vision. Sight, after all, is the dominating sense, feeding the intellect images for it to devour greedily and digest into pattern, perspective, knowledge of the world. Many poems in *Erosion* contribute a voyeuristic feel to the whole of the work. “I Watched a Snake,” for example, positions Graham as the passive viewer of a snake “so slow / between the blades you couldn’t see / it move,” which gradually evolves into commentary on the desire *to know* by way of sight as “the honest work of the body.” Graham’s voyeuristic perspective is reversed, however, in “Kimono,” where she is watched by a young boy hidden in the evergreens, “his eyes a sacred store / of dares, / to watch.” The two perspectives are somewhat combined in “Tragedy” where Graham watches from her window both the play of neighborhood boys and her neighbor across the street—who also watches from the window. Interestingly, the action in this poem takes place in the space between the two watchers who “sustain the visible” even after the boys move beyond the frame, beyond their field of vision.

Literary critics who have studied Graham’s fascination with sight disagree on where her work is most effective. Bonnie Costello, in her essay “Jorie Graham: Art and Erosion” (1992), argues that Graham’s earlier work—especially in *Erosion*—upholds a central visual icon in each poem that she claims “boldly reassert[s] modernist values and ambitions which [Graham] has never entirely surrendered” (374-375). Criticizing Graham’s later work, Costello observes a postmodernist shift towards uncertainty where “vision occurs in moments wrested from chaos rather than preserved in sequestered icons” (375). For Costello, whose essay is constructed around Graham’s linguistic description of masterpieces of visual art, Graham’s “eloquence and sententious boldness” is strongest in *Erosion* where she uses painting as “her primary model for how we can pursue the invisible in the visible, how we can shape our limitations into a form that can surpass them. In relation to the word, the visual icon seems inexhaustible, infinitely deep, yet centered” (373).

However Willard Spiegelman, in his essay “Jorie Graham’s ‘New Way of Looking’” (1998), views Graham’s earlier work differently. Spiegelman argues that Graham’s use of vision in *Erosion* is too “easy” when compared with her “more explosive confrontations...with description” in later works (261). He explains:

Reading Graham we understand that “to look” is never a transitive verb, no matter how much one wants it to be. Reality will not stay till long enough for us to capture it. But Graham began her career as a poet whose

looking occasionally—but not always—reached an ending, coming upon moral certitude. In “I watched a snake,” she employs a classic maneuver: observation leads to emblem-making...The human analogy allows her to end on a note of triumph, with the kind of generalization that her later work eschews along with conclusion. (260)

Whether, as Costello suggests, Graham is most expressive when her vision is centered or whether this central point of view insufficiently treats the complexities of Graham’s project, both critics agree that the sense of sight figures prominently in Graham’s work.

By convention, the visible connotes the believable, which in turn points towards the establishment of boundaries around *known* things—the intellect’s beloved facts. But Graham is interested in multiple, alternative ways of knowing. Placing sight itself under her microscope, Graham attempts to hold “in solution, unsolved” both the willful and powerless aspects of vision. Two poems, “Making a Living” and “Salmon,” directly engage vision as a metaphor, the former considering vision linguistically and the latter physiologically.

Graham begins “Making a Living” already struggling to bring together apparent opposites:

Sometimes it is as easy as defining the common boundaries
of night and day. Because they are too easily apart;
even in the blurred hem of dusk and dawn
the white lake goes here,
the dark between
the pinecone lips

goes there...

The passage visually enacts the very narrowing of definition it describes. Again, definition is said to be “too easy,” especially when considering “blurred” concepts like light and dark, day and night, that exist more as shades of each other than in terms of their separateness. But the intellect seeks to illuminate edges and thus, “dissolve” this separateness:

We think

that if what keeps us separate were found, it would dissolve.
It makes us feel our thinking is less cruel.
I see, we say, wishing the daylight distances
to be the terrain of the mind,
something you can own
by crossing,

not *I am seen*, or *can you see me?*

In our language sight becomes a metaphor for knowing, for understanding, and Graham proposes that we desire the saying so (“*I see*”) to lead to the *knowing*. Graham frequently associates light with intellectual modes of thought, as though clarity results from the improved visual acuity in a well-lit room. The I/eye doing the seeing here reflects the intellect actively pursuing an object. But the intuitive mode of thought is more self-reflexive and Graham represents this with passive voice (“*I am seen*”) or by removing the I/eye as a subject altogether (“*can you see me*”). Having surrendered control, the *seeing* subject becomes the object of sight, and substituting the implied referent behind the metaphor reveals a sense of the union Graham desires—I am *known*, can you *know* me. As long as the I/eye is seeing an object, knowledge is directed away from the self. When the self becomes the object, understanding includes the self and distance is crossed. In this passage Graham points out the irony present in our desire for union that is enacted by an outward-directed intellect, “cruel” because its very approach creates the distance we long to dissolve.

The distance between subject and object, logically unavoidable in language, becomes the thing forever made present by our desire to communicate, to cross the boundaries of self. Fittingly, the poem then moves into a description of a love relationship characterized by controlling behavior:

A man I loved
needed to pin me down when we made love.
Imagine us to be a kind of music box—that someone owned us,
opened us up; the pain
a knot we tied between our two good lengths
of privacy,

the way we agreed
to forego understanding. For love is to become, like pain,
at last opaque.

Here, lovemaking represents a “need,” a desire to possess through domination. When compared to Graham’s description of sight that immediately precedes this passage, the implication seems to be that vision, like Graham’s aggressive lover, needs to pin its subjects down, to “own” them through an almost forced union. Ultimately, though, this kind of “love” only constructs more boundaries, being “opaque,” knotted, distant. Graham concludes the poem with a comparison to “other, truer, lovers: *finding* and *being found*”—that is, pure understanding, union between subject and object. However, Graham herself prevents their union, being the I/eye that imposes separation through her ceaseless looking, her desire to possess and understand.

“Salmon,” too, explores the drive for understanding, for union, in language weighted with images of sight. Again, Graham positions herself as a voyeur, first watching salmon on television as they swim upriver to mate and then remembering herself as a child watching two people make love. Watching, in this poem, is a passive, “helpless” act. Images before the open eye swim through a river of nerves and into the mind just as salmon swim instinctively upriver. In both instances, the scene is a

resolution of will
and helplessness, as the eye
is helpless
when the image forms itself, upside-down, backward,
driving up into
the mind, and the world
unfastens itself
from the deep ocean of the given...

Recalling the image of the “solution, unsolved,” the word “resolution” here lends particular emphasis to the combination of unlikeliness. The tension between the “will” to see and the “helplessness” of seeing contorts the image sent to the mind for understanding. Though physiologically accurate, this “upside-down, backward” image carries with it a sense of distorted reality, which perhaps is an evolution of Graham’s notion of “the white lie” from her earlier work—knowledge based solely on vision, observation, the science of intellect covers rather than reveals reality.

As in “Making a Living,” “Salmon” links this act of seeing with the image of a couple making love. Yet, the lovers in “Salmon” take an entirely different approach to union than do the lovers in “Making a Living.” But the leap Graham makes between fish and lovers may seem untrackable to the reader unfamiliar with this poet’s thought process. Critic and poet Robert Hass—who himself writes a poem in which two lovers seek a kind of union through lovemaking only to watch it disintegrate when the will to possess it through “evolved eyes” is introduced (“Privilege of Being,” 1989)—sees Graham’s unpredictable patterns as contributing to her “magic,” observing that “the intelligence of the poems often consists in leaps of imagination, or leaps of inference. And in the way of intelligence, these leaps can feel like sudden, surprising turns. They’re not what you expected and they need to be read and read again.” The association Hass observes between the intellect and the expected is no accident; the very suddenness of the shift to unusual images is a deliberate move on Graham’s part to slow the reader’s probing intellect (Gardner, *An Interview* 99).

Seeking to disarm this will to control, Graham explores the effects of thinking when vision is shut down. The lovers in Graham’s “Salmon” make love with “eyes closed” and seem to recover a satisfying, if unsustainable, sense of union while at the same time Graham watches (as a child) from behind the blinds:

I watched, at noon, through slatted wooden blinds,
a man and woman, naked, eyes closed,
climb onto each other,
on the terrace floor,
and ride—two gold currents
wrapping round and round each other, fastening,
unfastening. I hardly knew
what I saw. Whatever shadow there was in that world
it was the one each cast

onto the other,
the thing black seam
they seemed to be trying to work away
between them. I held my breath.
As far as I could tell, the work they did
with sweat and light
was good.

Guided by the intellect, Graham's *seeing* only confuses her. Spiegelman observes that "Graham seldom really *sees*: if she did, she would have clear direct objects of vision. Instead she looks *at*, *toward*, above all, *through*. The prepositions direct her sight" (261). Graham herself admits, "I hardly knew / what I saw," an image that nurtures the sense of mystery surrounding the unknowable, unownable scene. Because her mode of understanding is dominated by sight, she fails to *understand*. The "slatted wooden blinds" not only serve as a barrier between her and the lovers, they also represent her blindness—which is quite different from the lovers' sightlessness. There is a union through shadows that "each cast[s] / onto the other," and subtly resembles the otherworldly type of love Milton describes in the well-known passage from *Paradise Lost* where Raphael discloses to Adam an angel's experience of love. Immaterial, the angels experience none of the boundaries and limitations of human desire:

Whatever pure thou in the body enjoy'st
(And pure thou wert created) we enjoy
In eminence, and obstacle find none
Of membrane, joynt, or limb, exclusive barrs:
Easier then Air with Air, if Spirits embrace,
Total they mix, Union of Pure with Pure
Desiring: nor restrain'd conveyance need
As Flesh to mix with Flesh, or Soul with Soul.
(VIII, 622—627)

Graham's desire for union in both "Salmon" and "Making a Living" seems to hold as its ideal Milton's image of "Total" union where the "Pure" and "Pure Desiring" suggest the same kind of wholeness as Graham's "other, truer, lovers: *finding* and *being found*."

Approaching this kind of union, the lovers in "Salmon" seem to have momentarily blurred their separateness.

bathing the walls,
the corridors, light that is no longer light, no longer clarifies,
illuminates, antique, freed from the body of
the air that carries it. What is it
for the space of time
where it is useless, merely
beautiful?

Bathed in a "light that is no longer light, no longer clarifies," the walls that surround the lovers scarcely seem confining (unlike the walls in "Harvest for Bergson") when freed from the

investigating light of analysis, logic, intellect. To further the sense of “otherness” existing in a space between moments of intellectual knowing, Graham describes herself as watching the lovers through the bounded spaces in the slatted blinds as she pauses between breaths. The gaps between the firm slats allow her this unexpected experience, but like a held breath, it is unsustainable. The failure of this visual experience to fit securely into any established pattern in Graham’s life is precisely the quality that gives it life. Just as in “Wanting a Child,” “useless” moments such as these are relevant because they illuminate the “merely beautiful.”

Graham explores this notion of uselessness throughout *Erosion* by creating a tension between what is and is not useful. Seeking links in a pattern, intellect is drawn towards the useful, identifying a reason for each part of the whole. Conversely, the useless exists independently, outside of pattern, outside of boundaries. One example of Graham’s pairing of the useful and the useless can be seen in “Wood Wasps in the Spanish Willow.” Part two, for instance, closes hopefully with the assertion that the fates will “spin something perfect and useful out of [the fishers’] waiting,” but then part three asks whether something can indeed be “more true” simply because an ordering hand “saves” it from uselessness. Graham herself reflects on the importance of uselessness, observing

how in between – not in the act of description itself – but in the cracks of it, the thing emerges. You have to undertake an act which you know is essentially futile in the direct sense: the words are not going to seize the thing. But what leaks in between the attempts at seizure *is* the thing, and you have to be willing to suffer the limits of description in order to get it. (Gardner, *An Interview* 96-97)

For Graham, bridging the distance between cracked things is useful and necessary because this “futile” act results in a delicate network of connections, a fragile structure that easily cracks. The buried world sealed beneath the work of reason might, indeed, be more true (or valuable) because of its inaccessibility. Graham’s “futile” act of engaging with language is itself an effort to enter this space where the “thing,” the poem’s soul, sings. Attempting the will to control, to “seize” the subject within the boundaries of language, reveals the subject’s sheer elusiveness. Once the poet wrestles with this controlling urge, she is able to experience the art of poetry, the ability to glimpse what is unknowable through her own failed attempts at knowing.

Throughout *Erosion* Graham holds “in solution, unsolved” the controlling eye of sight and the beauty of uselessness, and two poems, “To A Friend Going Blind” and “In What Manner The Body Is United With The Soule” provide insight into these opposites. Both poems experiment with surrendering control by disengaging vision. While “In What Manner The Body Is United With The Soule” foregrounds the sense of hearing, “To A Friend Going Blind” accentuates knowledge garnered through the sense of touch.

“To a Friend Going Blind” begins by establishing a firm boundary: the medieval wall that is the town’s perimeter:

Today, because I couldn’t find the shortcut through,
I had to walk this town’s entire inner

perimeter to find
where the medieval walls break open
in an eighteenth century
arch. The yellow valley flickered on and off
through cracks and the gaps
for guns.

Reflections of *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*' "Harvest for Bergson" surface in the image of the secure medieval walls that "hug" the city where "it feels rich to be / inside their grasp." However, in this evolved version, the wall seems to be less of a barricade from the world and more of a means for "entering" into it. Like the "slatted wooden blinds" in "Salmon," "cracks and gaps" in the wall make possible "flicker[ing]" glimpses of the open valley outside the "perimeter." This perspective emphasizes the desirability of boundaries. As Graham later concludes, they are "beautiful" *because* "they block the view" of sunflowers extending without boundary "as far as one can see." Again Graham leans towards the gaps between boundaries, the useless spaces in the structure, to provide a context for understanding.

Graham relinquishes visual control in this poem and embeds it with imagery of touch to illustrate the intellect and intuition operating within an alternative mode of perception. For example, Bruna, the woman teaching Graham to sew, "takes [the cloth] in her hands" to feel for "the built-in / limits"; the "street...hugs the walls" of the town; and Graham, too, feels the "grasp" of the city walls as she experiments with blindness:

I shut my eyes and felt my way
along the stone. Outside
is the cashcrop, sunflowers, as far as one can see. Listen,
the wind rattles in them,
a loose worship
seeking an object,
an interruption. Sara,
the walls are beautiful. They block the view.
And it feels rich to be
inside their grasp.

Even the wind seems to finger the sunflowers as it "rattles" them "seeking and object" in the same way the intellect seeks something to resist its probing. The association between touch and vision converges in the allusion to Rapunzel. Costello reads Bruna—with her "measuring tapes hang[ing] down, corn-blond and endless, / from her neck"—as a mirror image of Rapunzel:

As a kind of Rapunzel she can teach the poet, who can teach her imminently blind friend, to get imaginatively beyond the walls. We may remember that Rapunzel's lover was blinded by the witch until Rapunzel's tears fell upon his eyes and cured them. Bruna teaches how the outside world might come inside, transfigured, how limitation might provide access since the whole world itself seeks "interruption." (380)

Ironically, the walls that “block the view,” enable a richer kind of sight. Costello refers to this as getting “imaginatively beyond the walls”; Graham refers to this as the *beautiful*.

In yet another peculiar juxtaposing of images, Graham simultaneously describes the city walls and her friend Bruna who is teaching her to sew. This combination links the boundary images to Graham’s frequently occurring image of fabric; but even more significantly, it allows Graham to further explore the notion of the useful and the beautiful. For example, Bruna fingers the fabric

like a good idea, feeling
for texture, grain, the built-in
limits. It’s only as an afterthought she asks
and do you think it’s beautiful?
Her measuring tapes hang down, corn-blond and endless,
from her neck.
When I look at her I think *Rapunzel*,
How one could climb that measuring,
that love.

Here, the examining intellect seeking weaknesses enters into an understanding of how the fabric—or how an idea—works, is concerned primarily with “cutt[ing] a pattern.” Beauty, useless to the fabric’s utility, is considered only as an “afterthought”—literally *after* analytical thought has taken place. The intellect inspects function, usability: selecting fabric to make a useful dress or walls to make an effective border for defense. The *beautiful* surfaces almost accidentally; it seeps in through the inevitable cracks that appear in the perfect wall or the perfect idea.

Fittingly, Graham’s poem exists by an accident of reason: she couldn’t find the “shortcut” to her intended destination, the eighteenth-century arch, and as a result, she discovers the *beautiful* through the cracks in the medieval wall. The town itself seems to hold reason and faith “in solution, unsolved.” The city wall, a vestige of the medieval Age of Faith “breaks open” into the eighteenth-century arch, built during the Age of Reason. Costello suggests that in this move, Graham “recognizes both limitation and the artistic transformation of limitation which designs an inner space to be permeable to the outside, even to reveal it” (360). Bringing together both reason and faith, Graham illustrates the ways these two opposites combine to give a flickering glimpse of the world beyond the walled boundary.

But Graham tries never to give preeminence to any one way of thinking. She instead strives to portray the ways in which “accidental” meetings of reason and faith give rise to the “beautiful.” Her poem “In What Manner The Body Is United With The Soule” embodies this “both/and” approach thematically and structurally. Divided into three separate parts, the poem first glimpses the vastness of open spaces existing beyond tangible boundaries, then moves into the experience of trying to recover this sense of otherness into a rational, measurable world, and finally closes by describing the ways our world supports both intellectual analysis and intuitive wandering.

Creating an atmosphere of “otherness” in part 1, Graham begins by discarding her will to control through vision. “Entering” into this boundaryless space occurs by way of hearing:

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

a float

The first line break alone reveals this sense of something different: knowledge not arrived at through sight (“Finally I heard”). More importantly, Graham doesn’t just hear, she hears *into*, implying the mixture of movement, space, and boundaries. The preposition that Spiegelman observes directing Graham’s vision here directs her listening, pushing it outwards, away from the self. The “into,” however, is difficult for Graham to analyze: “Not that I heard / very deep, / but heard there was a depth.” The intellect knows there is a “depth” but it cannot be measured or organized. Just as in “To A Friend Going Blind” Graham acknowledges the “pleasure” of boundaries resulting from their ability to “hold,” “hug,” “grasp” and even “rescue” the self. But Graham is also interested in the “struggle” that exists within the tension *between* bounded space (the “surface”) and open spaces (the “depth”), a struggle she implies in images of the argument made for “fate” and “free will”:

I heard

in a piano concerto
 the distance between the single instrument
and the whole
 republic
heard the argument each made
 for fate,

and free will.

Once again, Graham draws a distinction between the “single,” the “whole,” and the “distance” that both separates them and holds them together, though the intellect is uncertain how to organize this distance into a recognizable pattern.

Approaching this idea from another angle, part 2 inverts this perspective so that instead of entering a space “past the surface tension,” Graham “pull[s] up” relics into this world of boundaries:

From the mud
 of the Arno
in winter, 1867,

we pulled up
manuscripts
illuminated by monks

in tenth century
monasteries.
Sometimes the gold letters loosened
into the mud,
into our hands.

Graham goes on to describe their failed vision: “we reached through / blindly / for relics.” The “blind” forcefulness of this pulling and reaching starkly contrasts the passive “listening” of part 1, which in turn creates a contrast between mere experience (the “useless”) and the will to understand (the “useful”). Both hold in common this suspended place where ideas are held “in solution, unsolved,” but while part 1 seeks to engage the suspension through immersion in it, part 2 seeks to engage it from a subject-object distance, examining each part in an effort to understand the whole. The intellect sees this as “an act of rescue” where “relics” are saved from the depth, the uselessness that the intellect cannot control in part 1.

Bringing together both perspectives in part 3 with an image of the reflected waterstriders, Graham attempts to shape a union where both modes of perception exist simultaneously:

Upstream the river
is smaller,
almost still.
On a warm day
the silence of the surface holds
its jewels,

its tiny insect
life.
In silence the waterstriders
measure ripples
for meaning.

The oscillation between moments of submissive experience and active analysis—both described with past tense verbs in parts 1 and 2 to suggest the unsustainable—are wed in part 3 with present tense verbs. “Silence” and “still” moments distinguish this shared place from the “listening” and “reaching” of the previous sections. Moreover, the waterstrider and its mirror image feed from the same gold bee that “accidentally” touches the surface between the two, again underscoring the significance of unanticipated, uncontrolled events:

They catch the bee

that has just touched
the surface

accidentally. In silence
the strider
and the backswimmer
(its mirror image

underwater, each
with ventral surface toward
the waterfilm)
share the delicate
gold bee. They can both,
easily,

be satisfied.

Satisfaction, Graham says in this passage, arises out of a willingness to let things be/“bee.” When we are not listening “into,” pulling “up,” or reaching “through,” the present moment surfaces on its own “accidentally,” or as Graham has said in earlier work, things will “illuminate themselves.” Both the “useless” and the “useful” coexist without attempting to “rescue” one from the other.

Like many of Graham’s other poems in *Erosion*, this poem closes with an image of sexual union, the “mating striders” representing the most optimistic and “satisfied” lovemaking in this volume:

Of silence, the 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.

This coupling results in a union of both sides—metaphorically, the coupling of the intellect and intuition—represented by the gold eggs they create. Graham’s move towards union here at first seems to contradict her concept of the suspension of opposites “in solution, unsolved.” However, the striders themselves are not altered by the union. Rather, the *product* of this union is “gold,” precious because it represents the “beautiful,” the “blossoming,” that can result from this meeting of opposites—just as in “To a Friend Going Blind” where the eighteenth-century arch exists intact in the same space as the medieval wall. The poem ends with the image of a bird flying away with the eggs, “host / to a freedom / it knows nothing of.” Since the emphasis here is on freedom being associated with a lack of knowledge, Graham seems to arrive at an image of

the ultimate unknowableness of this kind of unity, although we carry its possibility with us everywhere. Still, what she does assuredly convey is her propensity for questioning how we can know what is believable and how we can believe what we know.

In *Erosion*, Graham studies the ways human understanding is affected by vision, an idea first introduced in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*. For Graham, *seeing* usually acts like the intellect, “seizing” an object within its gaze and making it useful. Graham tries to find ways to interrupt this visual mastering in order to experience the “useless,” the “beautiful,” in a more fluid process she sometimes calls “entering.” Ultimately, Graham’s pursuit of the “beautiful” throughout *Erosion* wears away to reveal a new approach to her subject and to her poetry, seen in her next book, *The End of Beauty*.

Chapter 4. The Pull Towards Ending

“Beginning always beginning the ending”
—*Self-Portrait as Hurry and Delay*

Jorie Graham’s poetry repeatedly asks epistemological questions: “What does it mean to understand?” “How do modes of perception operate on the thinking mind?” In *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, Graham attempts to define intellectual and intuitive ways of thinking by their separateness and in *Erosion* she experiments in combining these perspective. In her third book, *The End of Beauty* (1987), Graham again scours the parent rock of her earlier work to rethink the problems raised by her previous lines of questioning.

The End of Beauty takes the next logical step in her inquiry into human thinking by considering the unsustainability of the perception of beauty itself—each beginning introducing the idea of an ending, the resolution of the narrative, the quenching of desire. As a result, *The End of Beauty* is largely an exploration of the question “Where does the end / begin” (Beauty 86). Though in *Erosion* Graham is aware of her paradoxical feelings on matters of closure, her focus remains fixed on the business of “entering.” The poems in *Erosion* manifest a series of open-ended beginnings where Graham presents first one, then another, then a third way of “entering” her subject, repeatedly asking, “How far is true enough?” and often concluding ambiguously, “there is no deep enough”—thinking is presented as an unending process of exploration. Even the final poem in *Erosion* “The Sense of an Ending” (anticipating *The End of Beauty* in its structure and length) proposes that “the human / souls are in a frenzy / to be born” – to enter into a forward moving narrative. The poem, in fact, fails to provide the “sense” of an ending to the work as a whole. Concluding with “in this lie we call blue light,” “The Sense of an Ending” circles the reader back to the beginning of the book which opens with “San Sepolcro”: “In this blue light / I can take you there.” By smoothly joining ending to beginning, Graham closes without closure, creating a seamless body of work that appears to inspire the line of questioning in *The End of Beauty*.

Interestingly, the opening poem in *The End of Beauty*, “Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them,” seems to interrupt *Erosion*’s self-contained cycle by revisiting the images of pregnancy in “San Sepolcro.” The ironically titled “San Sepolcro” itself engages beginnings and endings with images of the mind being both pregnant with thought as well as a “holy grave”:

How clean
the mind is,

holy grave. It is this girl
by Piero
della Francesca, unbuttoning
her blue dress,
her mantle of weather,
to go into
labor. Come we can go in.
It is before
the birth of god.

A place of both beginnings, “birth,” and endings, a “grave,” the mind bridges this distance when it fully engages the present moment, expressed in this passage with present tense verbs. Graham goes on to emphasize process—“entering”—over destination:

It’s a long way.
And the dress keeps opening
from eternity

to privacy, quickening.
Inside, at the heart,
is tragedy, the present moment
forever stillborn,
but going in, each breath is a button

coming undone, something terribly
nimble-fingered
finding all of the stops.

In *Erosion* thinking as a process actively involves the combination of both intellect and intuition, but the experience of the “present moment” dies when thinking is disengaged and a “solution” is reached.

However, whereas “San Sepolcro” focuses on the pregnant Madonna perpetually unbuttoning her dress “before” arriving at “the present moment / forever stillborn,” “Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them” finds Eve, pregnant with a “gesture,” about to give birth to an action that will end the “present moment” and sweep plot and narrative swiftly into motion. Here, compelled by cause and effect, Graham tries to isolate the precise moment when the pull towards closure takes control of the suspended idea. The poem begins with a gesture—Eve tearing a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge—and traces each step in her thinking as she turns to hand the fruit to Adam. But before she does so, her thinking “swells”:

But a secret grows, a secret wants to be given away.
For a long time it swells and stains its bearer with beauty.

It is what we see swelling forth making the shape we know a thing by.
The thing inside, the critique of the given.

* * * *

as the apple builds inside the limb, as rain builds
in atmosphere, as the lateness accumulates until it finally
is,
as the meaning of the story builds,

Graham's earlier metaphor for revision, the "erosion" of her previous work, now seems to shift to one of pregnancy. "The given" work, pregnant with ideas, "swells" into the shape of something new, something that is a "critique" of the former. The poems that comprise *Erosion*, stained with the beauty of Graham's failed attempts at grasping her subject, swell with the shape of "the thing inside" – ideas that will lead to *The End of Beauty*.

In this sense, "Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them" begins a critique of Graham's earlier work by disrupting *Erosion*'s circularity and directly engaging the presence of *ending*:

But what else could they have done, these two, sick of beginning,
revolving in place like a thing seen,
dumb, blind, rooted in the eye that's watching,
ridden and ridden by that slowest of glances the passage of time
staring and staring until the entrails show.

The "revolving" motion of beginnings associated with "blind" eye "staring" at a thing that has been *seen* to death again recalls the image of the blind moths who "circle, circle" in "Tennessee June." Sick of "beginning always beginning," Graham now moves towards an experience of "beginning the ending." Her attention, though, is directed not so much at the ending itself but at the pull towards ending, a process whose difficulty Graham acknowledges: "I wouldn't say [*The End of Beauty*] is managing to suspend closure. It might be trying to. But what I discovered in trying to write those poems was that the suction of closure was enormous – the desire to wrap it up into the ownable meaning – and that doing away with it wasn't as easy as I had imagined."

As a result, the poems in *The End of Beauty* often freeze and investigate each moment of narrative in the way a camera might capture successive moments of unfolding action within single frames of film, a style Graham refers to as "ritualistic enactments." This technique leads to poems that hold each thought, however slight, suspended in a single moment. Poetically, this translates for Graham into distinctively shaped stanzas that progress in a numbered, conceptual sequence and mirror the motion of thought they describe. "Self-Portrait as the Gesture Between Them," for example, enacts Eve's gesture towards Adam by tracing her movements in thought from the moment she first picks the fruit to the moment when she turns and offers it to Adam, a simple gesture that unfolds in 33 numbered stanzas. When Eve first tears the fruit from the tree, she does so "swiftly," and the short stanza—a single predominantly monosyllabic line—mimics the quickness:

1

The gesture like a fruit torn from a limb, torn swiftly.

2

The whole bough bending then springing back as if from sudden sight

As thought “swells” in Eve’s mind, though, the stanzas themselves also visibly swell (as seen in the passages quoted above), growing longer and heavier until Eve acts on her thought:

13

scribbling at the edges of her body until it must be told be

14

taken from her, this freedom,

15

so that she had to turn and touch him to give it away

16

to have him pick it from her as the answer takes the question

The poem continues in single-lined stanzas as it dramatizes the rush towards closure once thought is set in motion. Vendler argues that the increase in line length (from Graham’s earlier work) structurally enacts the tension between the desire to sustain the moment and the forward pull of the poem: “Earthly desire itself is the thing allegorized by Graham’s long horizontal line, desire always prolonging itself further and further over a gap it nonetheless does not wish to close” (Breaking 79). Although Graham narrates a beginning and follows it all the way through to its necessary ending, she remains intrigued by the moment when the two modes of thought meet, however briefly, to exchange momentum. The flash where a wandering thought becomes organized by the intellect serves as a focal point for Graham as she enacts this process again and again both thematically and structurally throughout *The End of Beauty*.

Juxtaposing opposites, Graham works within both Classical and Christian creation mythologies to play out the pull towards closure in narratives that pair Orpheus and Eurydice, Apollo and Daphne, Demeter and Persephone, Adam and Eve, Mary Magdeline and Christ, and even ideas such as “hurry” and “delay” or “ravel” and “unravel.” These long-lined series of “Self-Portrait” poems enact a break in style from Graham’s previous work. Vendler observes this structural difference as representative of Graham’s thematic shifts: “Earthly desire itself is the thing allegorized by Graham’s long horizontal line, desire always prolonging itself further and further over a gap it nonetheless does not wish to close” (Breaking 79). Vendler further notes that “The self-portrait, as a visual genre, has always depended on some mirror-strategy by which the painter can depict an object normally inaccessible to vision” (81). Considering Graham’s attention to the “mirror” poems in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* and the emphasis placed on vision in *Erosion*, the self-portrait framing of many of the poems in *The End of Beauty* again seems to demonstrate Graham’s evolving poetic mind as she makes yet another attempt to “see,” and thus to “know,” her elusive subject—in this case, the tug she feels for closure.

In a sense, then, perhaps the “end of beauty” is the end of structure, at least structure as Graham had previously envisioned it. Noticing this shift, Vendler suggests that “What the end of beauty provides is the beginning of wonder. If the ideals of shape and closure (provided as much by moral control as by aesthetic finality) are not to be the guide of life and art, then what can be the guide but contemplative mind” (Soul Says 237). But this contemplative mind cultivating a sense of wonder depends on the ordering eye for shape and closure. Of her work on these poems Graham says that she “wanted [them] to feel *not* safe – but *real*, open...The gash of the present

as not simply timeless but as the rip that affords a glimpse into a more genuine reality” (Gardner, *An Interview* 85). Thus, to approach this more genuine reality, Graham creates an uncomfortable and at times seemingly unstructured atmosphere. The absence of structure, in turn, creates a nostalgia for it; desire for structure reminds the reader of its indispensability. The “contemplative mind” wandering in thought relies on the organizing intellect to provide the kind of structure required for understanding. Graham disorients the reader with her multiple explanations for the meaning of “the end of beauty.” Is it pure being, that placeless, boundaryless presence out of time (“Here it is, *here*, the end of beauty, the present”)? Or is “the end of beauty” meant simply to draw attention to the subject of Graham’s investigation: “Sick of beginning” Graham now focuses on the pull towards closure (“what is it begins at the end she thought”). Of course, for Graham “the end of beauty” is likely to be a mixture of the escape from traditional structure, the declaration of subject matter, *and* a musing on delaying closure all held together intact.

Like the poems in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* and *Erosion*, many of the poems in *The End of Beauty* consider the ways in which the senses operate on the mind. Continuing to experiment with the sensory effects of perception, Graham carries into *The End of Beauty* her image of the helpless yet willful eye, but she also expands her scope to work with other senses, particularly the sense of hearing. The intellect still seeks entrances into an object by way of the organizing I/eye, but the visual imagery is now expanded and complicated with images of music and silence. These images provide Graham with a new language for describing the struggle between the pull of the desiring intellect and the longing to remain suspended between beginning and end. Translating this struggle into auditory images, Graham frequently returns to Orpheus and the mythological Sirens as metaphors enacting tension between the pull towards and suspension of desire. In Greek mythology, the Sirens, half-woman and half-birdlike sea demons, sing with such compelling beauty that sailors passing by their shores are overcome with desire to pursue the song. However, the pull of the Siren’s song ultimately ends with the violent death of the sailor. On the other hand, Orpheus is said to sing even more beautifully than the Sirens, and his melodic voice can both captivate the Underworld gods and calm sailors enticed by the Sirens’ lure. Together, Orpheus and the Sirens present yet another “enactment” of Graham’s struggle to understand the human desire *to know* as a combination of both will and wonder.

For example, in “Description” Graham combines visual and auditory imagery in a way that at once aligns listening with sight—both try to control the subject by pulling it in—and portrays intelligence heroically as it rescues the wandering mind from endless drifting.

Meet me, meet me whisper the waters from he train window and the small
skiff adrift

with its passenger, oarless, being pulled in by
some destination, delicate, a blossom on the wing of
the swollen waters.

Will you take him there to the remedy he needs, intelligence,
current, will you take him singing his song, back in, note by
note? She has the
antidote, the girl at the end, the girl who is the end, she has the only
cure

Graham follows with her eye the man, a singer resembling Orpheus, who both drifts in an “eye-shaped” boat and is pulled towards “the girl who is the end,” herself a kind of silent Siren listening from the shore. Here, wandering “oarless” is like a dis-ease. This uncomfortable condition can be “cure[d]” with intelligence, the “remedy” for directionlessness. Graham later in the poem refers to the singer as “unseized”; his “floating” is “stuttered” and his “passage helplessly re-/ iterated.” The sense of this stagnant progress mixed with words denoting language stuck on one syllable perhaps suggests Graham’s own frustrations as a poet, flailing with language that can’t quite pull her out of her poetic wanderings. She longs to bring order to this wandering with sight (“Will I see him awaken? Will I / see him / go under”) and comparing listening to sight, she worries over the increasing chaos: “The reasons / for things, love, are growing / wild; wild and inaudible in these meadows of lateness.” The inaudible, like blindness, prevents the intellect from organizing sensory information, and ideas remain stranded without a means for expression.

However the listener from the shore is the “cure,” embodying the intellect needed to organize the ideas and bring an “end” to wandering. The poem concludes with the combination of the two motions, both the pull and the stillness:

How far will he go pulled in by the listening of that far
shore?
And as she approached, unable still to see any body
within,
she heard to her heart’s delight a lovely harp,
a sweet voice,
and as long as he harped and as long as he sang
she never stirred to
save him.

Notably, the suspension of both motions occurs when the eye is shut down and boundaries vanish (“unable to see any body/ within”). In this state, the disembodied voice recalls Graham’s ideas of “the nothing” or “the ineffable” out from and into which the mind longs to swing. But this passage suggests that the swinging motion is stuck within “the nothing,” and until the listener moves to “save” him, the singer will remain “adrift,” held—almost tormented—by the pull towards closure that never results in the satisfaction of reaching a destination. This final line seems to respond almost directly to *Erosion*’s “Wood Wasps in the Spanish Willow” where Graham asks whether something can be “more true” because it is “saved / in the loss / of uselessness” by an organizing hand. The earlier poem suggests that when something is ordered and made useful by the intellect, it loses some of its connection to the “beautiful.” However here, Graham seems to want to be “saved” from wandering by the intellect’s drive for closure.

Uniting the pull towards closure and the desire to sustain the presence of the song is thus a crucial paradox for the writer and the reader. Graham wrestles with this feeling throughout *The End of Beauty*, enacting its tension again and again. In fact, if “Description” can be read as an allegory for the poet/reader relationship, then Graham casts herself in the role of Orpheus while

readers are like reversed Sirens, pulling the singer in with their listening². Drifting through the poem, Graham sings for an audience who “listen[s] from that far off shore” so that the singing itself desires a listening audience, a silent Siren to give meaning and organization to the song by listening. Listening from the shore, the listener/reader will not enter the poem to “save” Graham by organizing the ending for her. The pull of the listener demanding destination, expecting closure, then becomes the Siren call for Graham who must struggle with the desire both to seize control of the poem by bringing it to a conclusion and the desire to remain suspended in the music of the present moment.

Graham repeatedly returns to the image of listening as both “suspending” and “pulling” to reflect the tension between intuitive and intellectual modes of thought. But the struggle seems to be dramatized most wholly in “Ravel and Unravel.” In this poem Graham represents “suspension” and “pull” in the simultaneous cries of her daughter and of two eagles:

They dove they rose,
as helpless on the draft as in control.
Was it the sky's? Was it my listing silting in?
It was the cry where play and kill are one.
It made me hear how clean the sky around them was of
anything I might have trapped it with.
So when I heard her crying up ahead,
pulling me in,
I heard her cry not add itself
to this enclosure of an emptiness
growing more empty as the minutes flick. I heard
how it stood for strength and was not of that strength.
Unlike that screech, that ancient breath
with a shape above me,
it was desire.

The eagle cries suspend a mix of opposite motions. They both “dove and rose”; they were “as helpless on the draft as in control”; they inhabit a space where “play and kill are one.” For Graham, the cries represent a meeting of wandering intuition and controlling intellect coexisting in a “blossoming” moment without altering each other. But the cry of her daughter introduces “desire” into this empty moment, being “only siren” as it pulls Graham out of the boundaryless place where “minutes flick” and back into “minutes bearing down.” As in her previous works, this glimpse of “genuine reality” occurs accidentally; the poem opens with the family lost and wandering through rock formations. Yet, wandering leads to wondering, just as the cracks in structure offer glimpses into what is otherwise unnoticeable. Consequently, the successful tone of “Ravel and Unravel” emanates from this suspension and contrasts tones of helplessness in “Description” arising from separation and isolation.

Attempting to destabilize modes of perception and the reader’s sense of certainty, Graham employs the technique of establishing direct communication with her reader. She

² Graham even goes so far as to directly address the reader as a Siren in a later poem, “Noli Me Tangere”: “Siren, / reader, / it is here, only here, / in this gap / between us, / that the body of who we are / to have been / emerges.”

frequently addresses the reader as “you” or breaks the narrative line of the poem to ask personal questions such as “can you understand this?” or “what will you do next?” By entering the distance between herself and the audience, Graham involves the reader in the unfolding poem on a more immediate and intimate level. Graham admits the “nervousness” in her tone, necessary, she says, to grab the attention of the reader who she imagines to be “a non-idealist, a pragmatist, a reader who doesn’t necessarily even believe in literature; most importantly, though, a reader who doesn’t believe that words are telling the truth.” She urges, “*Trust these words*” (An Interview 99). One poem in particular, “Room Tone,” reflects Graham’s self-reflexivity. “Room Tone” simultaneously disrupts the forward-moving narrative by engaging the reader in the process of reading while it also struggles with the loss of the “present moment” and our unsuccessful drive to “to get it back.” Time, the senses, desire, all combine in this poem to draw the reader into an enactment of the hurry towards destination, towards closure. Graham interrupts this hurry in midstream, though, in order to make the reader fully conscious of the process.

“Room Tone” begins first with a command and then moves into a rapid succession of senses:

Turn around (wind in the sycamore).
Did you see that did you hear that (wind in the
____ ____ ___?) can you touch it,
what *can* you touch? will you
speak back to me,
will you look up now, please?

Abandoning punctuation in the second line, Graham strips perception of its boundaries, which exposes experience itself. Seeing, hearing, and touching combine to understand Graham’s parenthetical subject, but Graham seems to argue that understanding of this blank space transcends the senses. Like in “Tennessee June,” Graham invites the reader to “imagine your mind wandering without its logic” when confronting the empty space on the page. She anticipates the reader’s desire to plow forward through the line, but the silent, blank spaces slow this forward progression. Three spaces take the place the three missing syllables of syc-a-more. Here, Graham sets a snare for the reader’s eye/mind, interrupting the expected to give the intellect something that resists the pattern it is trying to make. The reader either stumbles over the unfamiliar blank spaces or supplies the syllables that Graham holds in her mind. In either instance, the reader must *stop* and *think* before participating in the move towards the end of the line, towards closure. The tension between wanting to stop and think and wanting finish the poem is the very action that Graham dramatizes in this poem.

Once she has seized the reader’s attention, Graham moves into direct conversation where the reader feels almost compelled to answer back:

Dear reader, is it enough for you that I am thinking of you
in this generic sort of way,
moving across the page for you that your eyes move,
moving in and out of these rooms that there be a *there*
for you?
Is it less fearful that you are held *in mind*
even if only as an instance?

From this point on, Graham engages the reader in kind of dialogue, illustrating through examples the reader's own pursuit of an ending, the "push to see." This effort to connect with the reader recalls the image of the Sirens from "Description" where the singer is pulled towards the shore by "listening." In "Room Tone" Graham looks at this relationship from a different perspective: the poet provides the "*there*" for the Siren-reader's eye to follow, just as in "Description" she provides the song for the listener to delight in. Also like "Description," this passage emphasizes the security associated with being "held *in mind*" rather than left to wander in the second line's blank spaces. But here, Graham struggles to reveal the way this kind of thinking rushes towards the inevitable close of the poem whereas the kind of thinking in "Description" leaves the singer stranded in an endless wandering. Bringing the two together, though, results in the experience of "blossoming" described by the eagle cries in "Ravel and Unravel."

Throughout this poem, Graham tries to make the reader struggle with the tension between forward motion of plot and the desire to return to a sustained moment of wonder. She gently guides the reader into empty spaces and then back again into structure. Having asked the reader to consider ways that structure can be a "less fearful" place than wandering, she immediately moves into room without visible boundaries. Her image of a white room containing all white fixtures paints a picture in which the boundaries between objects are difficult to see.

Consider this: there was a room neither you nor I are in nor can we
be.
Here it is: the light was so white you had to push to see.
To see the limbs in it, the instances.
The white metal chair against the whitewashed walls.
The white stone floor.
A jacket (mine?) white linen hanging on a nail.
A thistle in a coffee
can. Turn around—
did you can you will you

In such a white-out, the mind searches for something with edges, a focal point around which to compose context. In fact, in such a boundaryless place, Graham notices that even the shadow cast by a fly is "important," useful in the same way Wallace Stevens' jar in Tennessee organizes the slovenly wilderness. The intellect must "push to see" definition between things. Her bid for the reader to "Consider this" white place is reminiscent of her proposition in "Tennessee June" for the reader to "Imagine" wandering outside of rational thought. Both seek to explore alternative modes of thought; both desire to maintain an ability to return to a logical framework. To buffer the reader from the anxiety caused by entering a space without logical distinctions, Graham observes that this is a room where "neither you nor I are in nor can we / be" without introducing perspective, and thus, boundaries. But even her command to "Turn around" seems to lead to a blurred perspective, reflected by the absence of punctuation in the line that follows ("did you can you will you"). Past, present, and future tenses blend together; nothing is discernable in the white room.

Once again, having brought the reader into this seemingly empty space, Graham moves the reader back out to a place where things can be seen and held. The desire to exercise dominion over this openness returns us to a familiar image in Graham's work: a couple making love. The lovemaking in "Room Tone," though, is more like that in *Erosion's* "Making a Living": forceful, seizing, controlling:

When he held her down as if groundcover
they came as close as one can.
Like the gloss of the thing and the thing.
No room to turn around in.
Fallen down, there, for all the world to see.
Lingering and merciless and without knowledge.

This kind of lovemaking, like ownership, allows for "no wonder at all," and although the lovers come "as close as one can," the so-called union is "merciless and without knowledge." Unlike the white room where turning around contributes to the blurring of space and time, here the seer is so close that there is "no room to turn around in." Either mode of thought—wandering intuition or controlling intellect—limits perspective when it excludes the other. Graham attempts to hold the "merciless" lovers in the "white" room together in the same way that the two eagle cries from "Ravel and Unravel" are suspended in the air. But as long as one mode of thought dominates, this kind of harmony cannot be attained.

At this point in the poem, Graham again turns to her audience and directs their attention to their own back and forth tug-of-war between modes of thought, asserting in italics, "*this is what you want to do now, reader: / you want to get it back.*" The established plot progressing in the groove of time is fatally organized, and Graham proposes that what the reader wants is to move back *again* into the room tone—the unorganized "noise" beneath the pattern that intellect makes out of it. This oscillation is itself the struggle of *thinking* enacted in the poem, thought swinging back and forth like a pendulum between wandering and seizing. Desiring *to know*, the intellect seizes upon its subject but in doing so, it sets what Graham calls "narrative" into motion. This precipitates the rush towards closure, the end of the engagement with the idea. Attempting to forestall closure, the mind again longs to move back into the unknowable whiteness of the room or into the noise "beneath the hissing of the storyline."

In one final attempt at illustrating this cycle, Graham returns to the image of the lovers, emphasizing the effects of this "back and forth" motion:

breath being exchanged by the two
bodies,
the one breath back and forth and back and forth until they're dizzy they're
making themselves sick, in the white room, in the
(as in the land of darkness yet in light) white room, so white,
(and fansie that they feel
divinitie within them breeding wings) how white? (wherewith to scorn
the earth)
and freedom (click) and minutes (click) and

(under amazement of their hideous change)
something like what's called *being-born* (click, click)

Images of rocking back and forth between logic and wandering evolve from “Tennessee June” (“back and forth from the bone-white house to the creepers unbraiding”). But whereas the earlier rocking resulted in “blossoming,” it now makes the rockers “dizzy” and “sick.” Graham, too, seems stuck within this cycle. Even as she pulls the reader back to the image of the lovers, she instantly becomes aware of the white room. The inevitable progression of logical thought quickly follows with the subtle line of questioning demonstrating how easily the mind begins to organize information. This room, overwhelming in its openness (“so white”) readily leads into the desire to qualify, to set up boundaries (“how white?”). And thus, we swing back into the narrative once again. To further underscore the ongoing passage of time, Graham marks these motions with her parenthetical “clicks.” The curious mind swings out into openness, “freedom (click),” and back into structure, “minutes (click).” In one final effort to describe the motion of *thinking*, Graham attempts to name the struggle, “something like what’s called *being born*.” But ultimately, she surrenders her will to shape an ending and stops the cycle by abandoning the poem, the unclosed parenthesis itself giving form to both the tension of the cycle and the ticking away of time.

Graham plays out this problem throughout *The End of Beauty*, sometimes experiencing “blossoming,” as in the blending of the eagle cries in “Ravel and Unravel” and sometimes focusing on the vacillation between modes of thought, as in “Description” and “Room Tone.” To borrow Graham’s phrasing from *Erosion*, the “solution” seems to be that “beauty” can be most actualized when “held / in solution, unsolved.” Her fixation on motion and the pull towards endings leads Graham to eventually contemplate moments of stillness, and her next book, *Region of Unlikeness*, enacts these moments by trying to pause *thinking* before it seizes and gives shape to organized thought.

Chapter 5. Beginnings Without Meaning

“As long as I stand here, as long as I can stay still,
the x is alive.”

—*History*

Graham’s aspiration for “keeping the x alive” leads her in her fourth book, *Region of Unlikeness*, to make attempts at suspending forward motion so she can “stay still.” Graham’s desire to sustain the *x*—the “nothing,” the “ineffable,” the boundaryless—is evidenced in her ongoing preoccupation with form. After all, form can at once reveal the *x* through its intrinsic cracks or imperfections as well as cause it to slip away through what Graham calls in “Fission” the “imperialistic” attempts at seizure. But by enacting a pause in her poetry, Graham now tries to freeze “in-between” temporal moments, something she refers to as “the being-in-place more alive than the being.” Unlike the sequenced poems in *The End of Beauty* where actions are meticulously followed through to their effects, these poems explore the single instance as a whole subject before it is propelled into action, before it is fastened to a predicate.

The stillness in *Region of Unlikeness* evolves from Graham's previous questions concerning the desire for movement towards a subject. In *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*, the poems move in short, controlled bursts, proposing a solution or definition to each problem explored. In *Erosion*, Graham focuses more on the presence of motion itself: "seeking" a subject, "entering" a moment, "looking" for meaning. This forward motion, however, introduces the idea of ending; and in *The End of Beauty* Graham struggles with her conflicting desires to delay closure even as she longs to be pulled towards it. As she demonstrated in this last book, the making of meaning is to some extent ending dependent; a subject necessarily craves an object with which to connect.

But in *Region of Unlikeness*, Graham interrupts the pull of the narrative to study the paused subject in isolation, "Something without meaning, all beginning." Changing directions away from her line of thinking in *The End of Beauty* where she was "sick of beginning," Graham now returns this subject and reconsiders beginnings as a way to access a "blossoming" moment, something she describes in "At the Cabaret Now":

So that it's not about the ending, you see, or where to go
from here.
It's about the breath and how it reaches the trumpeter's hands,
how the hands come so close to touching the breath,
and how the gold thing, gleaming, is there in between

Like the breath exchanged between the dizzy lovers in *The End of Beauty's* "Room Tone," the artist's hands "come so close" to the breath, or inspiration, that excites them. Significantly, structure—here, the artist's trumpet—provides a means for engaging the breath, the "ineffable." Still, there is a distance implied. The space "in between" the trumpeter's hands and the breath is "blossoming" moment where the two meet and "the gold thing, glimmer[s]." While Graham remains aware of the linear progress of the poem's pull towards an ending, she gives her attention over to the "breath" itself, the thing that "exists" in the "in between" space before the comparison is made. In other words, her focus is drawn towards the object of desire in the very moment before it is desired.

Graham studies the moment "before desire" in her first poem, "Fission." She suggests—or rather, she hopes—that beauty can be approached and kept alive in the pause before desire sets the narrative in motion. "Fission" develops its perspective towards desire with a recurring image in Graham's work: the organizing gaze. Compelled by the pause before the action begins, Graham watches this moment slip into organization "as the glance glides over what used to be the open, / the free." The gaze in "Fission" is three-fold. A poem describing Graham's memory of watching the film *Lolita* at the time she learns of the Kennedy assassination, "Fission" layers the gaze Humbert Humbert casts on Lolita, the gaze of the camera angle focused on Lolita, and Graham's own gaze concentrated on the screen as she watches the plot unfold. Yet, as a poet, Graham is interested in the moment before desiring gaze seeps in to control the scene:

There is a way she lay down on that lawn
to begin with,
in the heart of the sprinklers,

before the mother's call,
before the man's shadow laid itself down,

there is a way to not yet be wanted

Unlike in *The End of Beauty* where Graham follows the path of desire acted upon, here she concentrates on the moment “before” the spark of desire. Targeting the “before” moment, Graham attempts to contain the “beginning,” the beauty, and arrest the rush of narrative before it swiftly takes hold. In doing so, she senses “immobilism set in,” a feeling she describes here as “free” yet unsustainable.

“Immobilism,” though, like beauty, cannot be sustained because the forward progression of time presents an ongoing series of choices. With each choice comes change and with each change comes the death of the present moment:

choice the thing that wrecks the sensuous here the glorious
here—
that wrecks the beauty,
choice the move that rips the wrappings of light, the
ever-tighter wrappings
of the layers of the
real: what is, what also is, what might be that is,
what could have been that is, what
might have been that is, what I say that is,
what the words say that is
what you imagine the words say that is—Don't move, don't
wreck the shroud, don't move—

Graham calls attention to the destructive force of *choice* with the word “wreck.” Choice ruins the present moment; it destroys beauty. The rapid catalogue of narrative possibilities gives a sense of the multiplicity going on beneath “the layers of the / real.” *Before* choice is imposed all possibilities exist simultaneously in a world of potential. But once a single course of action is selected—through a word, a gesture, a glance—the whole of possibility compresses into the particular and beauty is “wrecked.” For Graham, the anxiety produced by such implications is overwhelming and she urges the reader, “don't move—” Ironically, though, the very wrappings that choice “rips” away from reality and beauty are their “shroud,” a garment for the dead. The *x* that Graham hopes to keep “alive” is paradoxically deadened through immobility. Her effort to preserve beauty in a moment free from the pull of desire paralyzes the poem. Without the ability to create comparisons or to continue the narrative, the poem simply stops with a plea for stillness: “Don't move—”

The poem's inability to move introduces the undesirable side of suspension. In a place “without meaning, all beginnings” a sense of purpose is lost. Graham represents these inevitable feelings of futility with references to Becket's perpetually immobile characters from *Waiting for*

Godot, Vladimir and Estragon. Though allusions to Vladimir and Estragon appear directly and indirectly in specific poems, the stagnancy they connote is present thematically throughout *Region of Unlikeness*. Stuck in the pause where no meaning is attached to experience, Graham feels herself yearning for the very motion she previously found unattractive, admitting in one poem, “I want the fate / to come up now, make it come quick, this thing that is the predicate’ – ‘is is is is’” (43-44). Once concerned with the destructiveness imposed by the pull towards ending, Graham now experiences the desire for this pull, for without the ability to predicate meaning to the subject, her thinking cannot act, cannot form likenesses, cannot make sense of the chaos of random beginnings that lead nowhere. As a result, Graham repeatedly asks the reader “What is poetry to do now?”

Region of Unlikeness pursues this question by exploring the struggle for how to “keep the x alive” without paralyzing it. Graham does offer a sort of map to her thinking via the Forward in which she excerpts sections from Augustine, Heidegger, the Bible, and Melville dealing with comparisons, desire, and being. The volume’s title, adapted from a segment of Augustine’s *Confessions*, evokes the mysteriousness of the x —for it exists in a distant place where no likeness can be ascribed to it:

And being thus admonished to return to myself, I entered into my innermost being. I was able to do this because you were my helper. I entered into myself...and by my soul’s eye, such as it was, I saw above the eye of my soul, above my mind, an unchangeable light...I trembled with love and awe, and found myself to be far from you in a region of unlikeness.

Likeness, metaphor, presupposes a common ground between unlike things, narrowing them so the x can be known. Unlikeness, on the other hand, imposes separateness, opening distance between the subject and the unknowable, unapproachable x . Consequently, the x remains blurry, obscured from analytical sight, yet the distance endows it with a sense of magnificence and “awe.” Graham’s hope is that “pausing” in this region of unlikeness will lead to a “blossoming” moment where the x , the “ineffable”—for Augustine, God—can be held but not extinguished, not *known*.

However, Vendler explains Graham’s use of Augustine’s region of unlikeness differently in her book *Soul Says*:

he suggested that the region of likeness would be a place where no metaphors would be needed, where thing, thought, memory, imagination, and language, would all coalesce in the oneness of eternity. But in temporality, as we yearn forward and the object of desire or the object of memory perpetually recedes, we are shaped by the absence of the object of our longing. (213)

For Vendler, the “region of unlikeness” is the place where, when we are thwarted from seizing and controlling the “object of our longing,” we attempt to approximate unlikeness with comparisons. However, if, as Vendler argues, the “region of likeness would be a place of no metaphors,” then it would not be “likeness” at all—it would be sameness. “*Like*,” as Graham explores throughout this book, necessarily implies boundaries—a thing is not *the same as*

something different, but in some ways it is *like* it. The intellect's drive to know the world is born out of likenesses, out of defining boundaries between unlike things and then bridging that distance with comparisons. Predicating meaning to the *x* forms a connection to the unknown, and "wrecks the beauty" of it by way of our desire to name and control. Thus, in a "region of unlikeness" (as opposed the "region of likeness" as Vendler suggests) we can experience the presence of the *x* while allowing it to remain mysterious, unknown.

Inventing connections between radically unlike subjects also allows Graham to experience both the intellect and the intuition working at once. Graham combines foreign ideas with personal experience in an effort to access the universal connective tissue underlying both. Hence, she writes poems in which she juxtaposes the Kennedy assassination and watching the film *Lolita* ("Fission"); the atrocities of the Holocaust and her grandmother's residence in a nursing home ("From the New World"); a student's violent suicide attempt and two birds trapped in her house ("The Phase After History"). Graham personalizes the connections between these apparently unlike subjects, and in doing so she enacts her thinking through the writing of the poems. The connections, and by extension the poems, must at first be incoherent in order for the *x* to be glimpsed in what Graham is unable to say. Vendler explains this process: "The mode of comprehension derives from the connection of separate stories in the writer's mind—a connection that is at first unintelligible. As she comes to understand why she has intuitively connected them, she can compose a poem juxtaposing and interlacing them" (Soul 227). Chaos, then, becomes as much a function of form as the structure of the poem itself, and Graham invites chaos into her work to illustrate the process of making meaning:

No genuine form occurs without the honest presence of chaos (however potentially) in the work. Form, when it has power, is form wrenched from its opposite. I happen to favor work in which the potential (or posited) power of chaos is great. Because I believe it is so in the world. It *feels* right to me. So form wrought from a merely suggested, hardly virile, chaos might seem more artificial to me, less trustworthy, a *saying-so*, not a *doing*. (Gardner 94)

"*Doing*" chaos in her poems, Graham forces herself and her reader to consider the randomness involved with making meaning, and she illustrates once again the intellect's desire to organize single instances into pattern.

This process of forming connections, of forming likenesses, is intricately illustrated in "Who Watches From the Dark Porch," a long poem unfolding in seven movements, each building on and responding to previous sections. In a move resembling her attempts in "Room Tone" to walk readers through their own thought processes, Graham, here, strips away layers of perception to reveal an underlying chaos and then gradually reinstates a kind of order to her poem and to her readers' thinking. The epigraph to the poem by Mexican Nobel laureate Octavio Paz ("With fire. Everything has fire. Fire is very marvelous. / Now we prefer light.") sets an atmosphere in which the "light" of intellect is seemingly privileged over the chaos of passion although this "fire" exists in "everything." In the poem Graham transcribes chaos, or Paz's "fire," as a surreal shriek/laugh that exists under various layers of distraction. Reminiscent of modes of perception in *The End of Beauty*, "Who Watches From the Dark Porch" considers vision and hearing in the form of the organizing gaze which is disrupted by the introduction of a

not easily definable shriek/laugh. Rather than predicating a specific meaning to the sound (is it a laugh signifying delight or a shriek signifying danger?), Graham tries instead to hold both options together—a choice that involves no choice at all because it prevents any distillation of meaning and consequence. “Who Watches from the Dark Porch” also revisits *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* and *Erosion* in images of rocking back and forth on a porch swing while Cicadas sing (“Tennessee June”) and in images of the mixing of unlike substances seemingly held in a “solution, unsolved” (“The Lady and The Unicorn and Other Tapestries”). In addition, this poem looks forward to *Materialism* in its attention towards “matter.” Hence, the interplay of much of Graham’s poetics converges in this single poem.

The first movement in “Who Watches From the Dark Porch” sets up its subject in terms of a question that essentially asks how is it that we translate the ambiguity of the world into a particular, discernable meaning, a meaning which in its single-track mode feels like a “lie.” She asks, “Is it because of history or is it because of matter...”

—matter, (in it
 a shriek or is it
 laughter)
 (a mist or is it an angel they strangle)—
 that we feel so sure we lied
 or that this, here, this thing
 is a lie, a sound, a vibration? Thing

so beautifully embalmed in its syllables,

Here, Graham creates boundaries by establishing a dichotomy (“a shriek or is it / laughter”) but at the same time doubts what the boundaries can hold. This first section introduces the tension between chaos and order, between the intellect’s need for single answers and the multiplicity possible with intuitive wandering. Just as in “Fission” where she beseeches her reader “Don’t move—” Graham suggests that any decision, any forward motion, even the blink of an eye gives rise to shape and form:

Don’t blink and your looking will go barehanded one on one
 with the slippery, wrinkling, upslanting *it*, don’t
 blink ruddy impersonator in your gothic selfhood,
 fringed with lashes,
 trying to match your stare to the orchard,
 even as the possibilities (blink) begin to exfoliate,
 suitors surrounding her the one and only,
 right version

Employing the sense of sight, Graham demonstrates the way our “looking” hopes to enter the “region of unlikeness” and grasp the *x*, “the slippery, wrinkling, upslanting *it*.” In this passage, the eye dominates, earnestly trying to arrest the moment of wholeness where all possibility exists at once. But the “stare” expires in a “(blink)” that again propels the “looking” forward. Graham’s placement of the parenthetical “(blink)” between “possibilities” and possibilities “beginning to

exfoliate” enacts the futility of the stare in its attempt at keeping the *x* alive. For Graham, the commands to not move or not blink are temporal, and though they might allow for a kind of lingering within an experience, the “(blink)” inevitably follows, shaping multiple possibilities into a single “right version.”

However, Graham wonders whether this “right version” (i.e. historical fact, the poem) might be a “lie” that “beautifully embalm[s] in its syllables” the elusive *x*. The presence of the word “or,” the suitors courting the “right version,” the stare seen as an “impersonator” all instill a sense of structure and authority endorsing the production of *the* single meaning around which the intellect makes sense. The organizing gaze requires linearity, the single correct pathway, while Graham also longs to arrest linearity in order to keep the *x* alive. The multiplicity perpetually present in this underlying chaos clashes with the intellect’s desire to arrange one orderly pathway. In addition, any attempt to make it hold still (“Don’t blink”) fails when the forward progress eventually intrudes (“(blink)”).

Having established this image of vision to represent an attempt at stilling the *x* with a stare, Graham further narrows her focus in the second movement by pausing the action that occurs in between two blinks. The section itself is literally framed by the blinks—“Blink” opens the section and “Blink again” closes it. Breaking from the desire to *know* via structure and authority, Graham begins to speak directly to her readers, inviting them into a space where boundaries are momentarily lifted:

So. Sit down, here is a chair.
Later there will be bureaucracy, heredity, doctrine,
the ‘perfect’ day.

but now, sit, here is a soft wood seat
in the screened-in porch. Nighttime in summer. Hum.
Swarm of nocturnal intelligence.
Cicadas unceasing in the confectionery air.
The leavening of milliseconds.
Scurry of something in the leaves.
Laughter? TV through the neighbor’s screen?

Once in this stilled place—a place that is strikingly similar to the nighttime porch setting in “Tennessee June” where Graham first explored the mixing of rational and intuitive modes of thought—the underlying chaos that seemed like a “shriek” to the intellect in the first movement now seems more like “Laughter.” The pause between blinks feels somewhat disassociated from the natural progression of time as “the leavening of milliseconds” elongates the moment of pure description. In fact, in the passage that follows, there are no other verbs to modify the subject (the reader) and to propel the poem forward other than Graham’s invitation to “Sit”:

Sit. The latticework and on it your gaze now
Swank greens for your eyes to root in.
Spores filtering in.
Green dust and the glance it’s in, mixing,
green dust and the breath it’s in, mixing.
Sit.

The gaps in the latticework, like the gap in between the two blinks, hold the viewer's gaze, suspending it in a place of "all beginnings" outside of its will to control the scene. Various single instances of matter ("Spores," "Green dust") filter into this space and are held, but not controlled, by the gaze, and this "mixing" of unlike things recall's *Erosion's* study of the "solution, unsolved" where parts can remain whole while united. Grounded by sight, though, the second "blink" pulls the view safely back into structure, just like the thinker in "Tennessee June" rocks out into the darkness to be caught and let go by the "nothing."

In the third movement Graham introduces the ambiguous sound into the stillness. The sound comes from "across the fenceline," across the border between known and unknown. With the organizing gaze disarmed by darkness, now listening imposes *its* will to control by trying to make sense of the sound:

A child's sound. Maybe laughter—no—maybe a scream.
The sound of a carnivore at the end of the millennium.
The listening also that of a beast, listening.
For all intents and purposes a shriek. The air sucks it up.

A riddle. The air is riddled.
It seeps through the green the cicadas derange.

Listening, like vision, strains to know the meaning of that sound, seizing on it like a "beast," a "carnivore," listening for its prey. But again, the listening itself is made possible by the chaos, for the shriek/laugh "seeps through the green the cicadas derange." Here, "derange" encompasses the charged sense of madness surrounding this scene. The crazed "beast" listens in the darkness almost like a "deranged" madman. The familiar "green" of the neighborhood lawns is "derange[d]" by the cicadas de-arrangement of it. Meanwhile, the unknowable sound takes on an element of derangement, vacillating back and forth between a laugh and a shriek. Meaning becomes impossible to predicate to the sound—is this laugh the sound of a child at play or is it the shriek of a child in danger? Incapable of differentiating the laugh from the shriek, powerlessness to determine likenesses for this sound, the mind moves into a region of unlikeness where the *x*, the sound, is a "riddle"—enigmatic, unknowable, mysterious.

Unable to determine whether the sound is a "shriek" *or* a "laugh," the intellect by way of the sense of hearing strips back layer after layer of possibilities in order to arrive at something concrete. But Graham repeatedly thwarts this process by systematically dissolving identifiable boundaries:

Now I will make it impossible to tell the difference.
Now I will make it make no difference.
Now I will make there be no difference.
Now I will make it. Just make it. Make it.

How do you feel?

This subtle progression moves from the inability to make discernable distinctions between the shriek/laugh, to generating the same effects whether a shriek or a laugh, to blending the shriek/laugh into the same essential thing, to simply conjuring the idea of “shriek/laugh” in its wholeness without an effect, a connection, a predicate. In a sense Graham seems to be constructing a region of unlikeness where the *x* is alive in its entirety and not known in comparison to something else. Without something to resist, the intellect flails, and to locate the reader within this confusion, Graham asks pointedly, “How do you feel?” Having disrupted the intellect’s probing, Graham foregrounds intuition’s wandering in multiplicity as the central mode of thought she desires to engage at this point in the poem.

Guiding the reader into the throes of chaos, Graham now pauses to reflect on her role as the organizer of the poem. Apparently drawn under into this place of suspension herself, Graham asks permission to stop organizing the poem:

If I am responsible, it can’t be for everything.
May I
Close my eyes for a minute?
It is so sleepy here and green, green,
 the neighborlight golden-headed, slender,
stepping sidelong across the yard—
spice from his passage,
the lozenge of light over the treeflank and the greensward trembling,
where the flatfooted luminosity dawdles, substantial.
It is so sleepy here in the green.

The section is steeped in heavy, motionless words designed to maintain the feel of suspension. The scene is bathed in the “lozenge of light” where “luminosity dawdles.” In addition, Graham describes the shriek/laugh as a “prolonged cry,” “floating,” “buoyed,” and “wedged into the laminate grassy eternity.” The “green” of this suspended place further emphasizes a sense of *the x alive*, untransformed by the scene. As Graham the poet breaks from controlling the motion of the poem, the shriek/laugh itself takes over as organizer, “the mistress of the scene.”

In an effort to avoid *choice*, to avoid distilling possibility into a “right version,” Graham tries to hold onto this suspension by covering the shriek/laugh with distractions. Section five opens with an image of Graham “graz[ing] the channels” on her television and composing a patchwork narrative based on the visual fragments. But this attempt at holding multiple “versions” of a narrative together produces more a jumble of incomplete fragments rather than a recovery of the *x*:

Maybe if I turn the TV on?
Let’s graze the channels? Let’s find the
storyline composed wholly of changing
tracks, click, shall I finish this man’s phrase with this

man’s face, click, is this the truest news—how true—what are

the figures
and is this authorized—a spill? a leak?—whose
face is the anchor,
who’s that moving papers on the desk behind him

there, below the clock, a woman?

The desire to compose one storyline consisting of all possible options dodges the necessity of choice. Reluctant to risk committing to *one* narrative, Graham wanders in possibility. But possibility without the promise of choice leads to a kind of purposeless wandering. Holding the child’s cry as *both* a shriek *and* a laugh, the listener does not have to move to investigate whether the child needs help.

Layer upon layer of fragments cover the “problematic sound” of chaos that nevertheless still swirls beneath the surface of Graham’s piecemeal structure of possibilities. But as long as multiple versions are held together “without consequence,” the structure has no meaning and is nothing more than

—flecks of
information,
fabric through which no face will push,
proof,
a storm of single instances,
confetti tossed at the
marriage of
now to now

Without choice or a single storyline, cause and effect relationships cease to exist and all time is reduced to unrelated “single instances.” Keeping all possibilities alive with the *x* fills each “now” with unlimited potential that never materializes. Finally, Graham allows these random possibilities, “dots” of confetti, to be ordered into a pattern. Rescued from this aimless wandering, the mind rushes into a flurry of organization represented by the quick repetition of “connect the dots, connect the dots, connect the dots—” In a move that parallels section three, Graham again checks in with the reader: “Feeling okay?” With reason reinstated through a logical connecting of dots, the anxiety of being lost in a world of possibility diminishes.

In the next section Graham returns to the human desire to know unqualified Truth itself—to see the face of God. Her brief yet pointed Biblical allusion to Moses’ request to see God face to face brings us back to the desire for the “blossoming” moment, the *x* alive in a region of unlikeness. But the “voice-over,” the “sound track,” the “interpretation” are all layers shrouding the *x*, are all likenesses but not the *x* itself. Faced only with “interpretation,” Graham seeks alternative ways of knowing by asking “But what can we do,” a question that leads directly into the final movement of the poem.

As she considers ways of keeping the *x* alive, Graham again draws on her image of rocking “back and forth, back and forth,” but now she examines it from the point of view of “all beginnings.”

I sit in the rocker, back and forth, back and forth.
Let's consider the dark, how green it is.
Let's consider the green, how dark, with the rocker at its
heart.

Forwards, forwards, the sirens shriek past.
Into this they go: thick sound of the rocker rocking: wood on wood:
so compact there underneath their going,
a footnote, no messy

going
anywhere,
rocking

erasing each forwards,

erasing—a sound like dice being incessantly retossed.

Unlike the rocking in “Tennessee June” that results in a “blossoming” experience, the rocking in this passage rocks out but never back again. Even the “messy” layout of the words on the page mimics the “back and forth” motion of rocking; fluidity is reinstated with the repetition of “erasing,” as each line “erases” the preceding one. While there is no consequence to the unilateral rocking, “no messy / going / anywhere,” there is also no “blossoming.” Each “forwards” is like one of the thousands of pieces of “confetti,” unrelated to the next moment and without pattern or meaning. To borrow a phrase from “Tennessee June,” Graham, unwilling to risk making a choice, discovers that “Nothing will catch” her, but it will not let her go. Without the narrative line of cause and effect, every forward motion is a gamble unrelated to any previous action or any future action as the “dice” are “incessantly retossed.”

In her note on “Who Watches From the Dark Porch” Graham states that the poem’s conclusion is a response to the ending of Theodore Roethke’s *The Lost Son*. In the 5th part of this poem, Roethke attempts to locate the moment of “Stillness becoming alive / yet still.” Roethke’s central image of light moving over a field in winter, “an in-between time,” includes both a swinging motion as well as the combination of stillness and movement that Graham also employs.

It was beginning winter,
An in-between time,
The landscape still partly brown:
The bones of weeds kept swinging in the wind,
Above the blue snow.

It was beginning winter,
The light moved slowly over the frozen field,
Over the dry seed-crowns,
The beautiful surviving bones
Swinging in the wind.

Light traveled over the wide field;
Stayed.
The weeds stopped swinging.
The mind moved, not alone,
Through the clear air, in the silence.

Was it light?
Was it light within?
Was it light within light?
Stillness becoming alive,
Yet still?

A lively understandable spirit
Once entertained you.
It will come again.
Be still.
Wait.

Roethke's "stillness" here is temporal. This is time "in-between" two destinations, not a place in which to dwell indefinitely. The poem ends with a tone of anticipation for the future. Swinging out into this still, silent place where the mind can wander over the open field is good but the poem is nevertheless forward looking. This place is a temporary resting spot until the "lively understandable spirit" returns and we can swing back into the world of structure.

But Graham's response makes a distinction between "waiting" and "stillness."

so sit still sit still the lively understandable
spirit said,
still, still,
so that it can be completely the

now, center stage, this your kind's
victory, the mind in
apogee—said *still*, said
don't wait, just sit, sit

Whereas Roethke's "lively understandable spirit" points towards the future, Graham's "lively understandable spirit" is compelled by the "now." Present-tense experience allows Graham to access the boundaryless, unnamable x , but it also prevents her from moving, from making choices, from taking chances, from living her life. "Waiting" implies expectation and directs the mind's focus outward, away from the "now." For Graham, "still" is associated with beginnings, while "wait" is associated with endings. Roethke's poem provides Graham with the means to differentiate between the two temporalities, which to Graham are essential distinctions. In addition, Graham freezes the "mind in / apogee." Having rocked out into the "dark" to its fullest point, the mind hangs suspended between two motions, going nowhere. With the mind stilled,

the *x* is approachable, free from comparison, free from predicate, but stalled nevertheless, in dead space, devoid of meaning.

Graham's embarks upon her pursuit of beginnings in *Region of Unlikeness* with an earnest longing to keep the *x* alive by stilling it. But her repeated attempts to preserve a "blossoming" moment also isolate the *x* from time and motion, "emblaming" it, "shrouding" it, and holding it in a lifeless limbo severed from the past and the future. Graham's work in *Region of Unlikeness* suggests that "blossoming" must be approached as a process and not preserved as an artifact. In her next book, *Materialism*, Graham explores this line of thinking by nearing her subject, the *x*, through detailed description and then letting it go.

Chapter 6. The Holding and The Letting Go

"Is there a new way of looking—?"

—*Notes on the Reality of the Self*

If preserving the ineffable in a still moment was Graham's focus in *Region of Unlikeness*, then we might anticipate her focus to return to the known, tangible world in her next book, *Materialism*. The title itself indicates a movement away from absences and negations. After all, "unlikenesses" offer no concrete terms with which to know a thing, whereas the material world—the visible, measurable world—is the point of origin for much of Western knowledge. *Materialism* virtually explodes the Forward to *Region of Unlikeness* by scattering no less than fifteen adaptations of canonical texts amid Graham's own poems, some even with epigraphs of their own by Stevens and Hawthorn.³ In doing so, Graham deliberately embeds her own work in an ongoing tradition concerned with language and its relationship to humanity's unquenchable desire to know.

Materialism continues to find Graham contemplating stillness, but her emphasis shifts towards stillness as a momentary interruption of motion rather than as an end in itself. In addition, she begins to embrace "problems" from previous books with a more optimistic, confident tone. She discards *The End of Beauty's* anxious probing for the reader's presence and no longer seeks the reader's help or permission as she did in *Region of Unlikeness*. In fact, in the few places where she does address the reader directly, she does so assuredly with the composure of a trusted guide. However, tension still remains between knowable, material "things" and the unknowable, ethereal world. Throughout *Materialism* Graham revives her search for traces of spiritual essences present in the material. Having forged a kind of peace with her previous desires to know her subject by defining it (*Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts*), by entering it (*Erosion*), by exploring its rush towards closure (*The End of Beauty*), and by stilling it (*Region of Unlikeness*), Graham now abandons herself to her subject by engaging in contemplative acts of description.

The organizing eye, then, anchors the self to the material world just as it anchors Graham within this volume. Graham explains:

³ In *The Given and the Made* (122-4), Vendler looks at the ways these excerpts treat "the materiality of language."

the book [is] an attempt to undertake the act of description as a metaphor for insight, for the glance itself, which happens to be a verbal glance because of the ways in which looking cannot be separated from language. The glance as it tries to land on the shore of the world. As it tries, out of genuine curiosity and desire, to land on the shore of matter. The book tries to enact the ways in which that glance “colonizes,” the way in which it inadvertently destroys, the way in which it shies back and can’t reach, the thing it’s trying to describe. (A Conversation 10)

Materialism is framed by the glance, opening with Graham “Watching the river” and closing with her glance down at the river. Both acts of looking, unlike earlier images of vision, position Graham more objectively, at a distance from her subject, and thus, less inclined to “seize” or control it. Constructing new poetic challenges for herself, Graham explores alternative forms of description in experiments with diction and syntax.

Neither the opening nor the concluding “sentence” contains a verb modifying any subject—the impression is simply descriptive without imposing a poetic *will* on the scene. In fact, the book’s final line from “The Surface” echoes Graham’s “freeze-frame” snapshot of a gesture in *The End of Beauty* without actually locking the motion into a narrative: “I say *iridescent* and I look down. / The leaves very still as they are carried.” The first sentence describes what Graham does. But the sequence of actions is inverted from traditional descriptive operations. Typically, the poet “looks” first and then describes what she sees. Here, Graham describes first and *then* looks down. In reversing the order of action, she releases her subject (the leaves in the river) from the controlling gaze and linguistic ownership. Meanwhile, independent of the descriptor, “*iridescent*,” the leaves embody opposite motions and in doing so, they actualize “blossoming.” They are “still” yet they are “carried”; this snapshot of stillness and motion is described with a single image; the verb controlling the scene by actively describing what those leaves *do* is omitted. Graham refers to this moment when description precedes the glance as a poetic “victory” because “The glance is separated from the word...the river and the leaves get to move out from under the description. They are free” (Graham, A Conversation 10). Perhaps this final moment in *Materialism* where description separates from vision is what Graham is searching for when she wonders, “Is there a new way of looking” in the opening poem “Notes on the Reality of the Self.”⁴

This first poem finds Graham describing the motion of leaves carried by the river’s current, which leads her to contemplate language and even poetry itself.

Watching the river, each handful of it closing over the next,
brown and swollen, Oaklimbs,
gnawed at by waterfilm, lifted, relifted, lapped-at all day in
this dance of non-discovery. All things are
possible. Last year’s leaves, coming unstuck from the shore,
rippling suddenly again with the illusion,
And carried, twirling, shiny again and fat,

“Notes on the Reality of the Self.” I discuss the first one in this essay.

towards, the quick throes of another tentative
conclusion, bobbing, circling in little suction their stiff
presence
of the surface compels. Nothing is virtual.

In her book *The Given and the Made* Helen Vendler observes Graham participating in a long-standing tradition where leaves of a book are compared to the leaves of a tree. Vendler reads the river image in the final poem “The Surface” as a poetic wordplay, noting that the book “bravely closes with the old classical pun on vegetal leaves and the leaves of a book; Graham’s leaves are carried on the surface by the current of the river, carried away in time even from their mortal author” (129). Likewise, the leaves in the opening poem suggest this same idea. As a critique of “Last year’s leaves” (i.e. *The Region of Unlikeness*), “Notes on the Reality of the Self” presents yet another image of revision. Echoing *Erosion*’s image of revision as the scouring of the sides of a riverbed, “Notes on the Reality of the Self” finds ideas “coming unstuck from the shore” and carried towards “another tentative / conclusion.” Here, Graham suggests that the mind’s movement over old ideas that are “stuck” in form—perhaps even “stuck” in motionlessness as described in *Region of Unlikeness*—loosens them into something “shiny,” “swollen,” and “fat”—almost pregnant with potential. Active engagement with ideas brings them to life again (“quick”) even if the end result will be to suck them back into the “stiff” form of a poem. But these conclusions are “tentative,” impermanent, and will again give way to the new poems that will eventually follow *Materialism*.

Graham also draws an interesting contrast between what is “illusion” and what real, or not “virtual.” Since the end result of revision is the creation of new poems, Graham seems to suggest that illusion occurs at the moment of “rippling” where form begins to take shape. The illusion of control over the subject at best leads the poet to her “tentative conclusions.” However just before shapeliness descends, ideas swirl freely in a “dance of non-discovery” where the ineffable, the *x*, exists in a place where “Nothing is virtual,” but rather, everything simply *is* prior to language. Though “discovery” is desirable—as Graham herself admits that she writes poems in order to “discover”—the non-discovery that Graham describes here is more in accordance with “blossoming.” Wandering intuition and organizing intellect engage in a “dance of non-discovery” when they meet and are held for that glimmering moment “in solution, unsolved.” She describes the transition of “non-discovery” into discovery:

Expression pouring forth all content no meaning.
The force of it and the thingness of it identical
Spit forth, licked up, snapped where the force
exceeds the weight, clickings, pockets.
A long sigh through the land, an exhalation.
I let the dog loose in this stretch.

Graham tells us this *prior to* moment exists without boundaries: “The force of it and the thingness of it identical.” Yet, rather than cling to this moment in an unnatural suspension as she does in *Region of Unlikeness*, Graham allows the moment to be shaped; she “let[s] the dog loose in this stretch.” One can imagine the wild enthusiasm of a loosed dog charging hither and yon, trampling flowerbeds, seizing upon new scents. Coupling the image of the loosed dog to the idea

of the roving mind impatiently chasing after ideas at once invites a sense of restraint (the dog must be somehow confined in order for it to be released) as well as a sense of impetuosity. The mind's eager desire *to know* truly is difficult to restrain, and when allowed to run wild, it tracks and captures not essences but rather, "illusion."

With every attempt at description the poet records her perception and also contributes to it, furthering the sense of multiplicity. For with every recorded description, Graham's perception of the scene changes, whether from some external, material change in what her eye perceives due to the ongoing passage of time or from some internal engagement with the scene through the act of description. Thus, in a sense, each moment for Graham is a fresh moment in description:

I take them in, breath at a time. I put my
breath back out
onto the scented immaterial. How the invisible
roils. I see it from here and then
I see it from here. Is there some new way of looking—

Picking up the image of the "breath" exchanged between the lovers in *The End of Beauty* and fingered by the trumpeter in *Region of Unlikeness*, this passage finds Graham connecting with the "ineffable" in the landscape through her breath. The back and forth exchange of breath here allows Graham to bring "the scented immaterial" into her body where she holds it momentarily and then releases it back into the "invisible." Similarly, the poetry in *Materialism* tries to draw the immaterial, the *x*, into the lines of a poem through description where it, too, is held and eventually released. Graham mimics this back and forth motion within the rhythm and structure of the passage. The cadence of the line pauses in between the two motions so that the silence is held for just a fraction of an instant before its momentum pulls it back down again. She takes a breath "in" then puts it "back out"; she sees the world "from here and then / [she] see[s] it from here." This gentle swaying reinstates the give and take that was "erased" with each forward motion in "Who Watches From the Dark Porch."

Visually, Graham's presence also participates in and transforms the immaterial. Graham experiences the moment when she first glances upon the scene ("I see it from here") and then experiences the same scene again but differently only a moment later ("and then / I see it from here"). But "seeing" in this sense is also influenced by the physical poem. Graham not only sees the scene at the moment of perception but she also sees it again within the lines of the poem—the actual seeing compared with the "virtual" seeing through reading the poem. Hoping to unearth "some new way of looking," Graham plays with multiplicity within the lines of her poem. However, the logic of language ties her to linear description. She describes what she can see—the leaves, the crocus, the river—in an effort to approach what she cannot see—breath, the "scented immaterial," the "invisible."

As a poet, Graham wonders how she can experience and participate in the "dance of non-discovery" without overpowering it like the loosed dog. In "Notes on the Reality of the Self" and throughout *Materialism* she seems to find some level of success through description, allowing for multiple perspectives and simultaneous motion that does not arrest the forward progress of the poem. Multiplicity for Graham allows for looser boundaries where *being* can retain some

small degree of freedom within form—more so that is, than it can within binaries or rigid definitions. So she speaks in terms of “meanwhiles and meanwhile” where description is eternally

nailing each point and then each next right point, inter-
locking, correct, correct again, each rightness snapping loose,
floating, hook in the air, swirling, seed-down,
quick—the evidence of the visual henceforth—and henceforth, loosening—

The antithesis of *Region of Unlikeness* where Graham attempted to hold all possible outcomes together without choosing one over another, this passage finds Graham choosing first one, then another, then another of her possibilities. Each is followed through to its “correct” ending and then picked up again and followed to a new “correct” ending. With each layer of description, with each pattern created, meaning is sealed within form. But Graham responds to this “locking” by backing away from it so that each right response becomes “each rightness snapping loose.” Just as she begins a pattern, she allows it to loosen. In doing so, Graham finds a new approach to her previous concerns over closure. However, just as in the earlier poems where her anxiety produced by the pull towards an ending (towards a sealed form) resulted in poems that close without closing, here, too, she faces that same phenomenon: the poem ends with a dash. But should she choose to continue or complete the pattern she would be locking the poem, settling for the virtual, seizing the prey. By ending on the dash, Graham enacts the “henceforth, loosening.” Her poem moves towards a conclusion and then loosens to be “lifted, relifted” again and again.

Though this process of holding and then releasing the poem unfolds upon close reading of “Notes on the Reality of the Self,” the poem’s connection to its title is more elusive. After all, other than a few descriptive statements about what Graham sees, there appears to be scant reflection on selfhood and the reality of that self. But the poem in the abstract does seem to grapple with the idea of form and content, material and spiritual, body and soul. For example, just after Graham regards the visible and the invisible by wondering about a new way of looking, she contemplates the form of her own body: “Is this body the one I know as me?” The implied boundaries between the “I” and the “me” in this line impose constraints on Graham similar to those she faces when attempting to capture the ineffable within the form of a poem. Self-reflection positions the thinker, the subject, as the “I,” and the body, the object, as the “me.” Yet, establishing such fixed boundaries around body and soul, “me” and “I,” poses many enigmatic questions about the reality of the self, and in effect, the two are so elaborately intertwined that the possibility of isolating one or the other is an exercise in futility. One knows the self (“*I see myself*”) as a result of the materiality of the body. One knows the ineffable through the materiality of a poem’s form. Critic James Longenbach argues that for Graham, selfhood exists only in a relationship with the material, suggesting that she “dramatizes consciousness by focusing on the movement of the material world outside the self, ultimately suggesting that the self exists only inasmuch as it is composed of material phenomena” (170). The “drama of consciousness” unfolding in “Notes on the Reality of the Self” and throughout *Materialism* enacts again and again Graham’s process of engaging with the material world in an effort to get a glimpse of something “other,” something that defies description yet, ironically, can somehow only be approached through description.

Graham positions herself solidly within a descriptive style of writing in *Materialism*, moving away from the more narrative poems in earlier works. As a result, she delves back into primarily visual modes of perception with color figuring centrally in many poems. Moreover, Graham expands her usual color palette typically composed of plain tones like “blue,” “red,” or “green,” pouring forth a spirited vocabulary that revels in distinctions between hues. The crow in “The Dream of the Unified Field” isn’t simply “black,” it is “indigo, cyanine, beryl, grape, steel...”; the leaves in the second “Notes on the Reality of the Self” aren’t merely red, they are “russetts, magentas, incarnadines...”; the butterfly in “Subjectivity” isn’t Graham’s ordinary “yellow,” it is “butter yellow, fever yellow, / yellow of acid and flax, / lemon and chrome, / madder, mikado, justic, canary—.” Graham notably interrupts each color catalogue with either an ellipsis or a dash, which seems to suggest that the list could continue indefinitely. Resistant to simply piling adjectives on her subject, Graham breaks from the descriptive list with the knowledge that black letters on a white page will never fully represent the living image as experienced by her eye.

Indeed, here Graham faces the same language barrier that she has struggled with in the past. Her lists of colors begin with standardized names, but as Graham attempts to move closer to color, she coins her own words to better approximate what the list itself cannot seem to exact. Rather than relying on traditional color names like “yellow,” Graham associates the color with a material likeness (“butter yellow”) and then discards the signal word “yellow” altogether to move directly into metaphor itself. “Madder” recalls an Old World plant with yellow flowers; “mikado” points to the emperor of Japan; “canary” conjures an image of the vividly colored bird. This miscellaneous collection of color associations and stereotypes covers the spectrum of “yellow” while also accompanying it with a world of connotations that attempts to gather together a short history of the *meaning* of “yellow.” With this diverse visual medley Graham strives to render a description of color that transcends the word on a page—a move that attempts to blend form and content into description itself.

Graham’s fixation on the color yellow extends throughout “Subjectivity,” a poem that studies closely the “I”/“me” interdependence by considering the ways in which form and content intertwine. The poem unfolds in three parts. Parts 1 and 3 give a narrative description of Graham’s attempts to study a seemingly dead butterfly. Later, she realizes that her method of examination would have resulted in the butterfly’s death had not a more informed neighbor appeared on the scene. Part 2 extends this metaphor to the self, considering the subjectivity and objectivity of the body and soul. As a whole, the poem explores the inseparability of content and form, and also reflects on ways of knowing content through form, form through content.

The first part of “Subjectivity” focuses closely on the description of the butterfly:

Black bars expanding
 over an atomic-yellow ground—feelers retracted—
the marnarch lay flat on the street
 and did not move at all
when I lifted it
 onto my spiral
notebook

“Black bars” organize the yellow insect. In a sense they represent the barrier between the investigating eye and the knowledge of the butterfly. Being both “flat” and “still” renders the butterfly prime material for scientific examination. But Graham’s description does not move beyond the insect’s yellow color. As described above, she dives into a comprehensive catalogue of various forms of yellow in an effort to recreate the visual impression within in a “verbal glance.” The color moves from explosive “atomic-yellow” to an otherworldly “heaven-yellow” as Graham attempts to make sense of the color:

my gaze
vexing the edges of
the wings, ruffling the surface where it seemed
light from another century
beat against those black bars—yellow, yellow, gorgeous in-
candescent—

Compelled to know the butterfly, Graham’s thinking cannot get past the black bars that shield the yellow’s—and thus, the butterfly’s—mysteriousness.

Graham’s gaze is at once the means through which she can *know* the insect and the obstacle that prevents her from knowing it.

the gaze’s stringy grid of nerves
spreading out onto

whatever bright new world the eyes would seize upon—
pronged optic animal the incandescent *thing*
must rise up to an spread into, and almost burn
its way

clear through
to be.

This passage physically maps the distance between the unknowable butterfly, “the incandescent *thing*,” and the eyes, the “optic animal” trying to “seize upon” an understanding of the butterfly. As the reader comes to the end of the line where the butterfly is making itself known, the eye must swing back across the white space on the page to finish the sentence:

almost burn
its way

clear through
to be.

This motion of the eye is the very obstacle that stands between the butterfly and the mind’s knowledge of it. For the examiner, then, the eyes are like the butterfly’s black bars, obstructing and organizing the world for the mind. For any “*thing*”—any *x*—to be known, it must “burn” its way through the “stringy grid” of optic nerves. Though a forceful image, it also implies a

participation on the part of the “*thing*” under investigation: it must “rise up,” “spread into,” and “burn / its way / through” in order to be *known*, or rather, simply “to be.” Again, the succession of prepositions suggests a movement across some barrier—a movement through vision. Whether the black bars of the butterfly’s markings or the self’s eyes, form, Graham seems to say, necessarily binds content. In fact, even the lines of text spreading across the white page resemble “black bars” at once encumbering and enabling the poem’s *meaning*.

The second part of the poem, however, interrupts the drama of trying to know the butterfly by shifting the focus towards Graham’s contemplation of her self and her body.

She sits on the straightback chair in the room
A ray of sun is calling across the slatwood floor.
I say she because my body is so still
in the folds of daylight
through which the one beam slants.
I say calling because it lays itself down
with a twant and a licking monosyllable

across the pine floor-boards—
making a meaning like a wide sharp thought—

Here, Graham represents distance between the thinking self, the “I,” and the physical self with deliberately distinctive language. Referring to her body as “she” (“I say *she* because my body is so still”) Graham identifies her material form with the form of the still butterfly in part one and perhaps also with the structural form of a poem. Even more, the pronoun ambiguity throughout part 2 enacts the multiplicity Graham faces in her attempts to identify the reality of the self, for when considering herself, Graham applies both subject pronouns (“I say”) and third person pronouns (“She waits”). Further entangling the two, Graham attempts to understand the relationship of each to each, seeming to privilege the subjective case (hence, the poem’s title) over objective bounded form, asserting,

what she is to me,
a ceremonial form, an intransigent puissant corridor
nothing will intersect,
and yet nothing really
—dust, a little heat...
She waits.

Regarding the body, “she,” as nothing more than form, the self-aware “I” breaks it into material components, “dust, a little heat...” The ellipsis breaks off the thought to suggest that not much of significance follows these minor details—at least from the point of view of the “I” bound by form, that is.

Yet, the stilled form of “she” waits as an organizing beam of sunlight makes its way over the body, “making a meaning like a wide sharp thought.” As the controlling, meaning-making “eye/I” in this poem, this beam of sun has the effect of pulling “content” into “form.” The light

envelopes the physical body piece by piece so that once inside the beam of light, Graham feels an integration of both material and spiritual selves:

she is inside—(ear, cheek)—the slice of time

now on the chin, now on
the lips, making her rise up into me,
forcing me to close my eyes,
the whole of the rest feeling broken off,

it all being my face, my being inside the beam of sun,

and the sensation of how it falls unevenly,

how the wholeness I felt in the shadow is lifted,
broken, this tip *lit*, this other *dark*—and stratified,
analysed, chosen-round, formed—

As the unboundaried “I” feels the pull of organization, subjective and objective selves merge. Graham indicates this integration with a shift in pronouns. The distance between the “I” and the body closes as the “I” becomes aware of it being “my face, my being inside.” But rather than experiencing a sense of completeness, Graham’s “I” appears to feel the violation of being pulled into and contained by form. Words such as “forcing,” “broken,” and “unevenly” characterize the sensation of having “her,” the objective form, “rise up into me.” Graham inverts the expected, perceiving “lit” places as compartmentalized and “dark” places as more open, revealing the irony illumination being a limiting thing, of union being a *break* from wholeness.

The dichotomy of I/me, form/content in some ways imitates the dichotomy between modes of thought: intellect and intuition. A rational mode of thought endeavors to contain the “*thing*,” to know it by giving it shape, something tangible it can probe and examine. It can see the “incandescent” yellow through the “Black bars” of form. Intuition, on the other hand, prefers to wander in the “in between” space. Here, part 2 of the poem represents this “in between” place both structurally and thematically. Wedged “in between” the unfolding butterfly narrative, part 2 breaks apart the form and content that are so tightly bound together in the image of the butterfly, allowing body and soul to temporarily separate. In this suspension where things are held intact but unchanged there exists “nothing that can be deduced-from or built upon”; it is a moment “aswarm with dust and yet / not entered by the dust.” But this separation cannot be held; part 2 ends with the wandering “I” being pulled back into shape as the beam of light causes it to be “analysed, chosen-round, formed—” But just before this shaping takes place, the two modes of thought—intellect and intuition (form and content, “I” and “she”)—meet “as if by accident.” Just before the moment the integration the edges between the visible and the invisible glisten like “diamonds appearing on the tips of thing then disappearing.” But as the forward moving action progresses, the two are “suddenly” combined. The “accidental” nature of this meeting results from both poles being held together without either side dominating the other. However, the meeting is temporary as momentum shifts back into containment, back into form.

As she moves into the third part of “Subjectivity,” Graham continues to develop her image of this organizing light and the ways in which it mirrors the work of the mind. She examines the stilled butterfly while her desire *to know* it drives her towards monism, singularity, the one right answer.

Home I slid it gently
into the book,
wings towards the center of the
page,
the body denser and harder to press
flat,
my mind hovering over it,
huge, ballooning, fluttering, yellow,
and back and forth,
and searching for the heaviest book
to lay upon
the specimen,
to make it flat—

as if it were still too plural, too
shade-giving, where the mind needs it
so flat that light can't
round it, licking for crevices, im-
perfections

Significantly, Graham literally enacts pressing the butterfly “into a book” the way she metaphorically does through description. With an image distinguishing both the destructive weight as well as the descriptive power of words, Graham prepares to flatten the butterfly underneath a dictionary, “the heaviest book” she could find. A “specimen” for examination, the butterfly seems to have lost its uniqueness now that it has been transformed into an object to be studied. Whereas “the plural” gives the mind something to resist, flattening the mysteriousness, multiplicity into single-tract correctness gives the mind a submissive subject that can be easily known. The desire *to know* rationally is the desire to pull a thing apart and to place boundaries around those parts, making “meaning” or understanding possible. However, this act disregards a thing’s plurality just as the weight of descriptive language can kill the very subject it desires to know. Graham discovers this in the final lines of the poem when she sets the butterfly—reduced by analytical thought to nothing more than a “yellow thing, the specimen”—free where it rises “up of a sudden out of its envelope of glances—” Paralleling theme and structure, Graham releases the butterfly thematically and at the same releases it structurally by stopping her description and ending the poem.

In *Materialism* Graham searches for “a new way of looking” that would allow her to know and make sense of the visible and invisible worlds without inadvertently destroying them. She holds in tension the intellect and intuition as she enters into descriptions of these worlds. The desire for rational understanding risks burying a subject under a mass of language just as the desire for intuitive understanding risks suspending description in a stalled state of meaninglessness. The balance, the “blossoming” moment, occurs when she is able to release the

subject and end the poem before trampling it like an eager dog set loose in an open field. Much of Graham's focus in *Materialism* is on the material world itself, and she endeavors to know the invisible world through her study of matter. However, in her next book, *The Errancy*, Graham swings back into the invisible world, negating the visible, the material, in an effort to uncover and make present emptiness, absence.

Chapter 7. The Thing *Un-Seen*

“What shall we harvest the nothingness with?”

— *The Scanning*

Having plunged into the visible, material manifestations of otherness in *Materialism*, Graham in her most recent work, *The Errancy*, directs her gaze towards the unseen. “Materiality has dwindled,” she observes in “In the Pasture,” and frustrated by the limitations of sight, she longs to enter that which is still alive yet unseen: “There is an *other* side (my mind / knows this).” But the logical contradictions entangling this project betray the very mysteriousness that resides beyond Graham's rational knowing. In her previous work Graham argues that the gaze “controls,” “seizes,” and “kills” the essence of her elusive subject through organization. Seeking the unseen through poetry (a verbal glance) can only again result in entombing the ineffable, the *x*, in a linguistic grave. Weary of this ongoing struggle between materiality and spirituality, intellect and intuition, Graham nevertheless returns to the gaze, adjusting its focus beyond sharp edges and single correct answers to enable the perception of both plurality and the “nothing.”

Unlike the concrete images of the natural world (fallen leaves in a river, the recurring iron bullet) found in *Materialism*, *The Errancy*'s images evoke abstraction through emptiness and negation. Graham has dealt with the issue of absence in previous poems by substituting an ellipsis, an *x*, or a blank space (“____”) for the missing material, but in *The Errancy* the unseen appears in language denoting boundaryless space and logical negation. Poems entitled “Which but for Vacancy,” “The Guardian Angel of Not Feeling,” or “That Greater Than Which Nothing” contribute a sense of elusiveness by never really asserting a definite subject in their titles. Moreover, “Untitled One” and “Untitled Two” suggests negation by indicating absence through the negated title. Yet, the untitled poems also represent the complexities of fixing emptiness on the written page. To literally signify absence Graham would need to abandon titles altogether. Thus, the untitled poems deliberately engage the logical impossibilities of representing the boundaryless within a bounded language. In his 1998 review of *The Errancy*, Calvin Bedient describes this tendency in Graham's poetry: “In positing the possibility of an incorruptible whole (the ‘void’), in inferring it from the clot and choke of materialism, Graham enables it to exist ambiguously, putatively, elegiacally, and by virtue of a rumorously absence, which implies a presence elsewhere, unseen” (228). Forcing the gaze to concentrate on the unseen confuses the mind's rational desire to organize, and with this internal controller otherwise occupied with the business of emptiness, the unseen—the “incorruptible whole”—leaks into the awareness through other, more intuitive, modes of perception.

Graham tells us outright that her title, *The Errancy*, comes from Linda Gregerson's *The Reformation of the Subject*. Only in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* does Graham cite the title so explicitly—in both the epigraph to her book and in her closing notes section—yet in *The Errancy*

she goes even further. “Errancy,” she explains through a substantial quotation from Gregerson’s book, has its etymological roots in *errare*, meaning “to wander.” Just as “knightly errancy begins with a gaze,” Graham’s own quest seeks the limits of the gaze in an attempt to “glimpse” that which necessarily eludes it: the unseen, the ineffable, the “nothing.” Yet the rational mind disdains multiplicity and the directionlessness of wandering, longing instead for a single organizing point of view. Graham looks back with nostalgia on Intellect’s drive to seize a single right path in the title poem “The Errancy,” musing on “Utopia: remember the sensation of *direction* we loved, / how it tunneled forwardly for us, and us so feudal in its wake – .” *The Errancy*, though, disorients the logical mind by enacting this wandering within each poem, proceeding, as Willard Spiegelman observes, “by interruption and asides, with a flickering glance that makes...the visible a little hard to see” (245).

And Graham *is* concerned about how we see. Her first poem “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia” opens with the voice of an organizer fussing over the arrangement and rearrangement of the visible:

Shall I move the flowers again?
Shall I put them further to the left
into the light?
Will that fix it, will that arrange the thing?
Yellow sky.
Faint cricket in the dried-out bush.
As I approach, my footfall in the leaves
drowns out the cricket-chirping I was
coming close to hear...

The tone of this opening passage seems to be a combination of acquiescence and uncertainty. Arrangement of material things brings them into the light of analysis, but how will that help us see the invisible? The narrator of this poem seems resigned to the futility of this project. Every approach silences the sounds she was “coming close to hear” just as the structure of Graham’s poem fails to grasp the elusive essence of her subject. Here, the desire to “fix” the poem compounds the frustration. After all, to “fix” organization by fastening it to some sturdy structure has in the past proven to stifle mysteriousness, the “ineffable.” But to “fix it” also implies a sense of something in need of repair which in itself is a paradox because by fixing or fastening the invisible to language, the poet disrupts wholeness rather than fixing or repairing our connection to that wholeness. The remainder of the poem pursues this complex problem of language’s multiplicity of meaning exacerbated by its tendencies to also fail to correspond with meaning at all.

As the first poem following *Materialism*, “The Guardian Angel of Little Utopia” suggests the revision of earlier ideas rearranged into *The Errancy*. The speaking “I” simultaneously suggests Graham, the writer of the poem, “dizzy” from arranging ideas into poems as well as the Angel, “dizzy from the altitudes of the created place. This poem also develops a new image for revision—the busy bee exhaustively buzzing to and fro, laboring to create a meticulously structured honeycomb for a queen who is no longer present.

So dizzy. Life buzzing beneath me
though my feeling says the hive is gone, queen gone,
the continuum continuing beneath, busy, earnest, in con-
versation. Shall I prepare. Shall I put this further
to the left, shall I move the light, the point-of-view, the shades are
drawn, to cast a glow resembling disappearance

The Angel watches this furious organization from a distance and observes as the party-goers below wrench thought into form and strain ideas in to sentences, carving a place where “the rightness seems to root.” Mixing boundarylessness of eternity with the boundaries of place (“A bit dizzy from the altitude of everlastingness, / the tireless altitudes of the created place”), the Guardian Angel longs for presence within form, a meaning behind the word, ushering the imperative, “Say / *philosophy* and mean by that pane.” Thus, as a commentary on revision, this Angel acknowledges the flurry of meaninglessness that swirls beneath the surface of a system or a word, but at the same time the Angel yearns to participate in that organization, to “look out again,” skeptical of what it *can see*.

Language in “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia” falls into an opulent vacuity. As the angel arranges the material world from above, it watches as party-goers below engage in a hollow exchange of language.

It’s a philosophy of life, of course,
drinks fluorescent, whips of syntax in the air
above the heads—how small they seem from here,
the bobbing universal heads, stuffing the void with eloquence,
and also tiny merciless darts
of truth.

The party-goers are forceful and inflated, “stuffing the void with eloquence,” their “mouths submitting to air, lips / to protocol” and “yielding the effort-filled phrases of [their] talk to air.” Emptiness seems to have taken control of the speakers who are themselves reduced to puppet-like fragments. They are “heads” that bob, “mouths,” “lips,” and “tongues” that submit. Even their “talk” is oppressive: their language “whips” the air like “merciless darts”; it is “effort filled,” “pulled on,” “stretched,” and “forced.” Meanwhile, the air around them dominates this labored talk. Emptiness swells in this poem. Language itself is “busy” but its source, an empty hive (or worse, for even the hive itself is “gone”). All that remains is the “continuum continuing,” the perpetual rearranging, the buzzing of bees swarming without destination.

For all of Graham’s previous engagement with beginnings and endings, she seems now to have created an image of poetic revision that involves motion (the bees’ ceaseless buzzing) without destination. Repetition of “again” throughout the poem also underscores transition and impermanence. Any idea “fixed” in a poem soon mutates and is rearranged into something new though temporary. The new idea in *The Errancy* takes the shape of emptiness, as Graham indicates by carefully setting the scene in this first poem: shifting the visible, adjusting point-of-view, and altering the light “to cast a glow resembling disappearance.” But the poem struggles against plurality and the temporary even as it concedes its existence.

The tone at the close of the poem balances the opening as the narrator makes a plea for meaning, for organization:

Oh knit me that am crumpled dust,
the heap is all dispersed. Knit me that *am*. Say *therefore*, Say
philosophy and mean by that the pane.
Let us look out again. The yellow sky.
With black leaves rearranging it...

Strikingly similar to black bars arranging the yellow butterfly in Materialism's "Subjectivity," here the "yellow sky" is arranged by the "black leaves" swirling in it. Developing this perspective, Graham now suggests that form is desirable because it allows us to glimpse the invisible. Likewise, language and an intellectual mode of thought to organize it must in some way allow us an entrance into the "ineffable," the "yellow sky." Longing for narrative, for shapeliness, the narrator aspires for a predicate ("Say *therefore*") and a language that honestly approximates the thing it signifies. Closing (without closing—the poem ends in ellipsis) with a plea for meaning, connections, stability, Graham "prepares" yet again to face the pane/pain of language as both a frame through which to view her subject as well as a hurt that can kill that which it seizes.

The futility of touching with language that which cannot be touched fascinates Graham. In describing Graham's poetry, Bedient suggests that the poet wants what she "will never achieve, the articulation of an inarticulable totality" (221). Graham provides her own gloss in her epigraph taken from Sir Thomas Wyatt: "Since in a net I seek to hold the wind." In fact, the entire Wyatt poem "Whoso List to Hunt" illuminates Graham's work⁵. After all, what are allusions and epigraphs but recommendations for further reading and reflection. Describing the fatigue and futility in the quest for the elusive object of desire, Wyatt develops a hunting metaphor which at once conjures images of pursuit as well as the wildness of the thing sought:

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,
But as for me, alas, I may no more.
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore
I am of them that farthest cometh behind.
Yet may I, by no means, my wearied mind
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore,
Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,
Since in a net I seek to hold the wind.
Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,
As well as I, may spend his time in vain.
And graven with diamonds in letters plain
There is written, her fair neck round about,
"*Noli me tangere*, for Caesar's I am,
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame."

⁵ Wyatt's "Whoso List to Hunt" is an adaptation of Petrarch's *Rime* 190.

The anxiety here, as in Graham's work, lies in the knowledge of the thing's existence coupled with the inability to reach it. Wyatt gives a sense of the arduous work involved in the chase that leaves the hunter "weary." Graham, too, throughout *The Errancy*, expresses her own exhaustion and at one point admits openly the tiredness permeating her work: "Even the accuracy / is tired—the assimilation tired— / of entering the mind. / The reader is tired. / I am so very tired" (50). But the hunter in Wyatt's poem gives up the chase, discouraged by its futility—the word "vain" (and "weariéd") is repeated twice in this short poem further underscoring a sense of hopelessness. Graham, on the other hand, rises to the futility since she feels the presence of this "wild" thing as it rushes through her net; whatever she *can* catch in her net is quickly "tamed" with language and thus, only a faint shadow of its living subject. Juxtaposing Wyatt's hunting metaphor with Graham's notion of wandering as implied by "errancy" points to the poets' differing attitudes towards the "wild" thing. Graham could easily adopt Wyatt's hunting metaphor to explain her understanding of intellectual reasoning and its forceful approach to seizing its prey. Still, Graham's aim in *The Errancy* involves quieting the chase and distracting the mind with emptiness in order to liberate a more intuitive, less controlling mode of perception. Holding both intellectual and intuitive modes of thought together at once balances the combination of organization and wandering that results in "blossoming."

However, finding this balance—the place where intellect and intuition meet—is a task requiring sophistication and subtlety. Hushed boundaryless moments are fleeting as the mind searches for new ways to hold the wind, and in "Sea-Blue Aubade" Graham follows the motion of the mind from stillness to awakening, feeling for that "fraction of a pebbled instant" where the two meet. Opening similarly to "The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia" with a perspective from a windowpane (the scene already bound by a frame), Graham sets this pre-dawn scene from inside an oceanfront apartment. "Freedom" wanes as light searches for distinct edges, the blurry "thin gray floating" of night losing its mysteriousness. Comparing "light" to a doctor, Graham again associates the work of science and reason, with vision and boundaries. Recalling the organizing shaft of light in "Subjectivity," the sunlight here

Will want to be caught up in the weavings of freedom.
 To be caught up in the wide net and made to have edges—
 light coming in, so acidly, with the strength of wind or an ox...
 Outside, slowly, the grapes seem fatter.
 The cat moves its tail once in sleep.
 The silence is largest wherever an eye falls.
 Somebody's glance smokes through the blues until they start to
 feel...?

Darkness thins as the morning light fills the room, illuminating boundaries within the visible, making it "fatter" and necessarily "taming" the unseen. Like the Guardian Angel who begs to be "knit" into form, the light of reason eager to tame the "wild" thing itself longs "to be caught up in the weavings of freedom. / To be caught up in the wide net and made to have edges." The allusion, though, presents an inverted approach to Wyatt's poem. Rather than seeking to catch the wind, the "ineffable," within a net of reason, here, the organizing sunlight desires to be caught in a net of "freedom" and "made to have edges." Like the angel, it desires shape; it *wants*

to be seen. But with everyone asleep and no eye/I to organize the seen/scene, all remains for the moment still, “unalive.”

The emergence of vision, then, brings life to this dead, unorganized matter (from the point-of-view of the illuminating light, that is). Time and light seep into the scene, and what is seen prompts questions, prompts investigation:

sea of ideas – so blue –
although you can hear something like cuts in the blue –
and one can feel how the boat feels –
all of the freedom swirling and slapping round the keel, the here,
foaming round as feelings – and the still pitch of the dawn
grasping at transparency, as if something like an *hour* were
trying
to splash in, and make, and make...? what would it *make*? –
and in the suddenly awakening one:
an upwards glance, one take – a main-mast starting up –
sails glimpsing about, quick rules and suppositions – coalescings –
and then the single sturdier open gaze cast up: a stare: a fear:

Like nowhere else in this poem, here sight has dominion. The *moment* one awakens the progression of looking expands from an “upwards glance,” to a “glimpsing about,” “an open gaze,” and finally, “a stare.” The awakened eye/I instantaneously organizes the wandering “sea of thought,” bringing an end to Graham’s errancy and to the poem. Markedly, the sails on the boat catch the wind and launch the boat out of its swirling freedom. But since Graham herself claims that she seeks to hold the wind in a net—a consciously impossible task—the wind filled sails provide a point of contrast: thinking that “wanders” is like a net while thinking that “seizes” is like a sail. Meanwhile, Graham suggests that the reader identifies with the boat (“one can feel how the boat feels”) as it shifts from merely “floating” to being swept away by something “sturdier” in the same way that “feelings” are pulled into form when organized by reason, by the glance. The two modes of perception, feeling and thinking, “*do*” meet for “just a fraction of a pebbled instant,” and it is this fleeting moment that Graham returns to again and again in her poetry, unable to hold it in her net of language yet unable to resist casting that net.

While “Sea-Blue Aubade” ends with everything quickly “starting up,” Graham’s poem “Against Eloquence” begins with a “landing – very fast.” In a sense “Against Eloquence” works backwards from “Sea-Blue Aubade” in its efforts to find the “nothing” within the visible. Where “Sea-Blue Aubade” moves from sleep to awakening as feeling is arranged by vision into thought, “Against Eloquence” opens with rational thought in place (“We decided to decide. The drowse lifted”) then attempts to see beyond visible edges where the “unseen,” the “emptiness,” the “void” exists undisturbed.

Feeling around for that “fraction of a pebbled instant,” Graham explores the “frontier” of the “stillness decomposing.” Recalling former images in Graham’s work of imperialism and colonization, the “frontier” suggests the heavy-handed invasion of the invisible by the pioneering visible/audible as flowers conquer empty space with color and violin notes “pulse” in the open

air. Yet the mood here is optimistic. The “frontier” offers the possibility of “blossoming” when the two modes of thought meet. Drawn to the converging boundaries at this “frontier,” Graham listens for the pause between the two places:

And the frontier where the notes pulse, fringe,
then fray
the very same stillness we place our outlines
in, the very same one we have to breath, and flare our tiny
nets of words
into (who’s there?)(what do you hear?)(what hear?)(still
there?) – the very same – we listen in there –
the zero glistens – the comma holds –

Graham seems to locate a contrast between an active arrangement of stillness in the placing of outlines, the casting of nets and a less controlling (though no less engaged) act of gentle listening. Ironically, this kind of immersed listening allows for a different kind of sight—emptiness (the “zero”) “glistens” in a way that seems to transcend vision. Moreover, the “zero” itself visually represents the idea of “outlines,” for as an “0,” the “zero” is all outline—a completed boundary enclosing emptiness.

In this poem Graham returns as the voyeur watching as two lovers kiss in an empty alcove. Unlike the lovers from *Erosion* and *The End of Beauty*, though, these lovers are dressed entirely in black so that they seem reduced to mere faces—or even further, simply to mouths that “gnaw” at the boundary between them.

I watch the lovers a long time –
they kiss as if trying to massacre difference –
the alcove around them swarms its complex mechanism made to
resemble emptiness –
the shoppers go by; some vacuum hums;
something unseen, under-used, tarnishes; the daffodils
endowed by the widow x flourish – the lovers gnaw – the lovers
want to extinguish something –
something I know who to kill with a word, a single word –
the violin roils across the square --

The visual image of the kissing mouths resembles the visual image of the glistening “zero.” But, the mouths seem to press aggressively against the boundaries of their passion with their “arsenal” in an effort to “massacre difference” and “extinguish” desire. Passion, desire, feeling, swirl in the same space as the patterned notes from the violin that “roil across the square,” a framing that recalls the windowpane image from “The Guardian Angel of the Little Utopia” and “Sea-Blue Aubade.” Yet the square “swarms” (like the busy bees continuing the continuum) with organization “made to resemble emptiness” even as emptiness itself exists “tarnished” and “unseen” all around them. The lovers “fracture emptiness” with the destructive work of desire just as Graham fractures it with her “nets of words,” but “emptiness doesn’t take notice”; a “wild” thing, it drifts through the net undisturbed.

The title “Against Eloquence” itself “resembles” emptiness as yet another negation. While this poem may be against eloquence, it cannot state directly what it is *for*. Approximating the void in the same way that language signifies but does not equal a referent, Graham again positions herself to understand absence by negating what she *can* make present. Even the most expressive articulate language, Graham seems to say, is no different than the lovers gnawing at boundaries. Language fails to accurately represent its subject the way that nets fail to catch the wind or the way a “vague fabric tossed over the fire / as if to squelch it, ripples in the heat.” But in these failed attempts at knowing the emptiness seems to leak into view “*by accident*” when logical structuring either collapses entirely or produces something altogether unlooked for:

violin notes float, wrinkling, unwrinkling – no –
they are not wrinkled – the message not delivered – nothing
at the address now – notes rinsing nothing –
nothing bleached by their acid –
nothing illuminated by the ten thousand red tulips –

No less than seven negations adorn this short passage, progressing so that “nothing” emerges as presence, as subject. What begins as emptiness, negation (“the message not delivered”) slowly rises to our attention as a solid noun, “bleached” and “illuminated” by the visible. The void, the “nothing,” can be seen in terms of the space surrounding the red tulips and the yellow daffodils just as the empty space inside the “zero” can be seen by the outline surrounding it. These edges mark the outline, the “frontier,” the “pebbled shore” between the world of boundaries and the boundaryless.

Graham closes the poem with a question that further elucidates her position against eloquence: “What is the void once it is forced to cross through fire?” In other words, Graham wonders how the “nothing” can ever exist within structure, within language. Or perhaps it is an epistemological question that wonders what can be *known* about the “void” when it is wrenched from the “fire” of passion and forced to enter our world of rational light. Being “forced” into form causes any sense of “the void” to vanish. As a result, when language seeks to hold the wind in a net, it must come up with nothing rather than “the nothing.”

Throughout her evolving body of work, Graham invokes eloquence in order to make attempts at articulating the inexpressible. Language provides a vehicle for her struggle to account for what we know by way of the intellect and what we know more intuitively. We might anticipate, then, a poem that denounces eloquence at the same time it adeptly exercises language to approach the “ineffable.” “The genius of syntax,” Graham says, “consists in its permitting paradoxical, ‘unsolvable’ ideas to be *explored*, not merely nailed down, sorted, and owned; in its permitting the soul-forging pleasures of thinking to prevail over the acquisition of information called knowing” (Introduction xx). Hence, for Graham, “knowing” involves the convergence of intellect and intuition in an act that moves beyond mere fact-gathering to a conscious experience of understanding.

Through her epistemological errancies, her wanderings within and without ways of knowing, Graham hopes to discover “blossoming” moments of wholeness where both modes of

thought meet “in solution, unsolved.” Her early work in *Hybrids of Plants and of Ghosts* and *Erosion* reveals a poet striving to achieve a sense of balance between these opposite modes of thought. In her next two books, *The End of Beauty* and *Region of Unlikeness*, Graham begins to work more directly with the motion of time and its influence in shaping thought into experience and ideas into poems. But Graham’s most recent work, *Materialism* and *The Errancy*, develops the earlier ideas and explores alternative ways of *thinking* in poetry. Combining both modes of thought, Graham engages her knowledge of the invisible by way of description and then negation of the visible. While some poems glimpse the “blossoming” coexistence of both modes of thought, others demonstrate the ill effects of a broken balance that results in directionless wandering or description that buries its subject under analysis. However, as Graham discovers again and again, the marriage of both modes of thought cannot be contrived; instead, it is illuminated “by accident” when least expected. By risking an encounter with either way of knowing in a poem and by risking that the encounter might fail, Graham can slip into moment where intellect and intuition converge in an experience of “blossoming.”

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“ ‘We are yours i’ th’ garden’: Shakespeare’s Revision of the Biblical Fall
Narrative in *Othello* and *The Winters Tale*”

Academic Honors:

- Caroline Chermiside Award for Scholarship – May 1999
- Graduate Teaching Assistantship Fall 1997 – Spring 1999
- Dean’s list 1994 – Present
- Golden Key member