can imagine / just dissolved.' It is an example of how *Psalms* overlays several conceptual motifs with deftness, without the poems themselves feeling weighed under by poetic artifice.

Kiely's interest in the work of Bertolt Brecht has become more apparent in his most recent writing. Lines such as 'There are more categories / of walls than walls' borrow the humour and directness of Brecht, without seeming imitative. Elsewhere, chewy words show a close ear for internal rhyme: 'Pristine in the crystalline shibboleth of those we most miss' ('Shorn Screw'). Kiely places this alongside a fatuous piece of advertising jargon, 'the newest, most sophisticated cinema infrastructure'. The fantastical strains against the hyperbolic and mundane. Like Vallejo, Kiely is unafraid to smash headlong into the absurd, to pull at the fetters of time and place, and suggest that the possibilities of a shared, communal language can offer us relief from constraint.

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# AMERICAN GIANTS

*Jorie Graham,* Killing Spree, *Carcanet, £12.99,*
*ISBN 9781800175549*
*Fanny Howe,* This Poor Book, *Divided Publishing, £11.99,*
*ISBN 9781068439551*

Oluwaseun Olayiwola on two collections from poets in the later stages of life looking at the modern world

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In an interview with the *New York Review of Books*, Jorie Graham said of the title poem of her new collection, *Killing Spree*, that, even in the continuous obliterative offences of soul and justice streamlined to our lives via screens,

> one needs to keep trying – one needs to work to stay open, to show up to witness. And we have the imagination as a tool – we can ask art to keep rinsing the soul, keep helping it stay lucid and awake and raw enough to experience the pain, keep empathy alive, allow outrage to linger in our senses.

Graham is well known, particularly for her suite of collections in recent years that embrace long margin-to-margin lines, vertiginous point-of-view swapping, and, as in this collection, poems with lines that initiate in the middle of the page and terminate at the right margin. *Killing Spree*, continuing with these forms, also adopts previous collections' subject concerns – climate change, bastardised attentional capacity, ignorance of history – while writing after the 7 October massacre conducted by Hamas in Israel, the pretext used by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to carry out a genocide against the Palestinian people.

Graham doesn't go into specifics, but the references are clear in the bloody and rapacious depictions of violence in this collection. We read 'The classrooms exploded' ('The Killing Spree') knowing all universities

in Gaza have been rubbled, and comparisons are unavoidable when one speaker holds a dead lover in their arms: '—where is yr // ear—open yr / eyes, where are yr eyes, why / are your fingers / not, why will your eyelids // not—' ('No One Today'). A professor emerita herself, Graham also meditates on the upheavals in academic life that followed 7 October, such as students protesting genocide through demonstrations or building encampments to express their unwillingness to be complicit in the universities' administrative fecklessness. In 'Demonstration', one speaker finds themselves in the crowd:

> More and more gather in
>
> the canopy. Where
> shall we meet up
> afterwards, someone
> cries out. Here. Exactly
>
> here, is the answer.
> I listen to the day.

The dissipation of self into the crowd, into the 'river of selves, of dis- / appearing selves', is supposed to be one of our transcendent experiences, but the occasion for this disappearance is that of protest. Graham's project over the past several collections achieves paradoxical sentiments: that of a despair that is total, incomplete, seemingly irreversible, while continually grasping for and believing in a potential future where our wrongs may be righted. Graham's poems are not hopeless, generally. Which is why the emotive and linguistic landscape of *Killing Spree* is dire: 'We are in the lull / before history dissolves, / before terror comes and demands its payment in full / for what will not be delivered. / We will not be delivered' ('Before'). This allows a more meta paradox to become untangled: is writing about utter despair in itself a hopeful act?

Graham is nothing if not prescient, even as virtual depictions of the horror from 'citizen journalists' local to Gaza eerily transfer to broader conflicts between Israel, the US, Iran and Lebanon (events which flared after Graham's book was in print), from 'Inflammation':





> I touch where the name of the ocean sits on its map—
> where the steppes release fields
> where the fields release
> wheat, oil, spice—the mules & cannons arrive, the urgent rare metals, bacteria,
> longitudes & latitudes—the gentle straits, sea-lanes, troughs,
> all sitting there under
> the smoldering paper.
> And I cross them out. It is so easy.
> I will not let the containers pass through today.

It's in this prescience that Graham's eco-psycho-spiritual-historical argument becomes clear; we've tipped into the point of the 'spree', the throughline from the killing of the planet to the killing of other bodies, to the killing of our minds via attentional collapse, and thus the killing of our souls.

The best poem in the collection is 'The Eloquence', which binds political aphorism with the frenetic, desperate and gravely silly way in which the media environment makes the populace its subject. It is spoken by a journalist who 'always respected / the number of minutes / allotted for the interview—always believed in the existence of / the singular reason / for the world's incomprehensible / demise'. Although the speaker's position shifts as calamities amass, as they busy themselves with 'tracking who was logging in and logging out / of the current war'. Every writer must contend with this inquisition: what is the use of writing about disaster? What can writing, no, *poetry* do?

> And I envy the poets who are free to cry out
> as I turn in my copy, the day's final report,
> unless one more incendiary device goes off
> and I have to revise again how many managed to get out in time.
> It is never many.
> It is meant to be none.

The notion of having to 'revise again' the facts of certain reportage signals the unending incompleteness of the ongoing spree of killing in which the world seems to be trapped. And yet, it feels as though even the poet herself is being self-referential, to the degree that these

poems are themselves a kind of reportage; that as long as there is an 'incendiary device' going off (which there is) or the number of survivors alters (which it does) writing will inherently hold a lack, a cavern of incompleteness. If despair is to be found anywhere in this collection, it is in the admission that your instrument is fault-ridden and incapable of holding the 'all', the exact point of your critique of the modern era.

But it's not a self-cancelling truth; it is precisely this negative capability that Graham's work has imbibed from the beginning of her career. 'I / will let go / of the world / as it was // once' says the speaker in 'Then', a poem whose title insists that even in the face of the monstrous technological and political powers that be, that there can be a *then*, an *after*.

Graham has spoken at readings on the fabrication of collected poems, reflecting on the nature of anthologies that juxtapose a poet's work over time. Fanny Howe's *This Poor Book,* the last book she would complete during her lifetime, is a selected poems collated in an inventive way: rewritings of old poems as far back as 1997 are tessellated with new poems, all recomposed into a one titleless long sequence. As a novice to Howe's oeuvre, it's a challenging introduction (Rae Armantrout calls it a 'perfect introduction' of which I am sceptical) to a poet whose values of elision, fragmentation and seemingly outright deletion are practised line by line:

> Fall they will. Clouds are on the ground
> Rain across a swan
> Water stopped by stone
> Rebellious bushes
> Flowers storm
> The whitethorn alone
> With a horse
> Coole Park a dungeon
> Of leaves and black holes
> Soggy corridors
> No sons, no daughters
> No poets, no more house.





Howe's aim is, as with the best poems, to ask the imagination of the reader to fill in the gaps, so we, like the clouds 'on the ground' close the space from atmosphere to crust. One can see Howe's insistence towards a kind of metaphysical linkage in her suturing of the galactic ('black holes') and stratospheric ('clouds', 'storm') with the earthbound ('horse', 'leaves'), even the subterranean ('dungeon'). This sense of quick-fire movement between up and down creates a vertiginous reading experience through *This Poor Book*. Its 'lyrical shards' – as the back cover suggests – aggregate in explorations of politics, economics, war, domestic and intrapersonal violences, and religion. While it appears it is the Christian god to which Howe so often refers across the collection, the poet isn't didactic: 'I would like a question / To my answer. I would like more gods / Than one. In a nutshell / More songs.' Howe's lines are brief, contrapuntal and often monosyllabic, creating a propulsive reading effect, a buoyancy that keeps the reader reading. Furthermore, with its committed resistance to summary the work is imbued with the quality of a forward-pointing arrow. One can refer to the index to see from which collections poems originally came. At one point, Howe even recogises and refers to the porous structure she's used to hold these poems together:

> The structure failed to cohere at the end of the struggle.
> It had some music in it. Therefore, it could be located.

At first, I must confess to not being able to even hear the music of this collection. Repeated attempts to breach its surface often left me more bewildered. Howe's linguistic mode is one of density, not only in the craft of lines and stanzas but also across her output (she published over fifty books during her career). The richness of the experiences from which the poems emerged – going as far back as *One Crossed Out* (1997) to more recent work in 2019 – for this reviewer, did not always aggregate; at times, they almost cancelled each other out. I was locked-in, by which I mean feigning comprehension, in brief spurts:

An epiphany.
How long your hopes last

Until the next.

A poet's music is a mixture of things: diction, white space, typographic eclecticisms, prosody and of course, syntax, which is where Howe is at her most defining. In the fragment above, Howe's pressurising yet elegant skill is on display. The mind places a colon after 'epiphany' and after 'last', each succeeding line like the named epiphany to the line before. 'Until the next [hope]' is 'How long your hopes last' and yet it also it is also a noun phrase without a verb, unfinished, suggesting the desultory, at times futile nature of hope. The ability to craft both the bright and dark meaning of a word in a sentence of eight monosyllables, with one stanza break, is exactly what kept me reading.

The last line of this collection is 'There was no more reason to die', but the way in which the collection wrestles with faith does more than suggest Howe knew she had little time left: mortality is a core subject of this work. 'To those I would die for / Please be patient / It's summer somewhere / I hear good things.' In the face of the horrors of being human, those which are endemic to us like death, and those that, in our current times, *seem* endemic, like war or poverty, Howe faces and dictates her impressions with grace and linguistic skill. I didn't fall in love with this collection, but it has encouraged me to find the original mosaics from which these shards came.

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# THE POET'S SIGNATURE

*Nadine El-Enany,* Pelican Daughter, *Bloodaxe, £12.99, ISBN 9781780377780*
*Kamau Brathwaite,* Equinox, *New Directions, $17.95, ISBN 9780811224475*

Lola Olufemi on constraint and freedom in two new collections

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The central line of W.H. Auden's 1957 poem 'The More Loving One', published in *Homage to Clio*, reads: 'If equal affection cannot be, / Let the more loving one be me'. The message of the poem is crystallised, the speaker's fondness captured neatly inside a rhyming couplet. Auden's modernist experiment mixed traditional and experimental form, turning his poems into containers for compressed philosophical insight, lyrical in their constraint. Three years later, Gwendolyn Brooks published 'A Lovely Love' in her collection *The Bean Eaters*, writing: 'Let it be a hall / Whose janitor javelins epithet and thought / To cheapen hyacinth darkness that we sought', turning the poem into song to be experienced with the mouth and ear as well as the eyes. Here it is the texture of the words that matter ('janitor javelins'), and the obscurity of the meaning of 'hyacinth darkness' is balanced by the pleasure its sound evokes. Despite both infusing their work with modernist aesthetics, the fundamental contrast in Auden and Brooks' approaches to poetic scaffolding reveals the utter versatility of poetic form. As an extension of the writer, the poem is capable of being just about anything.

In this vein, both Nadine El-Enany's *Pelican Daughter* and Kamau Brathwaite's *Equinox* inhabit traditions which imbue the poem with strikingly different, yet equally affecting, imperatives. For El-Enany, the poem is an attempt to distil a thought or feeling, a sensory or affective response in Auden's legacy. It is a way to neatly capture a look, a passing sting, and the complicated feelings emerging from the task of parenthood. For Brathwaite, the poem is a means of elaboration, an intricate dance which requires sonic competence to unlock and understand. *Pelican Daughter* and *Equinox* demonstrate that regardless of experimentation