

BEFORE

Jorie Graham

it came, before the turn in the cherished
wind, what we called history, the turn
towards, all of it more and more
towards—what is it that is
coming—must come—unfathomable, unbreakable—you want it so, your
future, no the
future, so
badly—you stand
on the threshold of your century as on a high
parapet, brush in hand, a ladder wrinkling the air as it rises,
a kind of singing,
rung by rung—
all of you bowing to it saying thank you, thank you my lucky stars I am living
now—right now—
of all times this is the one now,
the air ahead all tongues, they are actually red why don't you
see it—& all will burn my friend—
are you there—
where are you now—
is there a place to still be
out there
now, in the actual future, which came about
after all—because none of this
will survive, though from here, so sun-dappled in
what we called hours,
long strings of human eagerness, & wonder curiosity hope expectation belief—
(under the skin greed)
(never mind that)
(greed feeling its way into the hours)
but the story above so shiny,
the whole prepared-for-the-future soul nodding, saying you're welcome, yes,
you're even more welcome
[*I'm letting you go now are you ready*]
[*I trust you to catch me*]
and the afternoon went on forever,
and the path to the walled garden
went on forever,
the repast the Sunday the sunlight burning this leaf then that one,
the wine on the table, burning, the bread,
the thudding of the minutes inaudible,
of what's *in* the minutes,
that greed,
like a fleet of bombers actually,
as the empty path filled up with men, rows and rows
stacked on the sides,
bodies crying or no longer able to,
a small path maintained for the stretcher-carriers,
but all of this still invisible
[except in the brushstroke]
the one with no legs saying to no one
what's this all about,
engines, sweat, memory of marching *as one,*
huddled up till he's a rag now calling for his mother,
vital fluid seeping into the dirt,
growling of plane circling low,
what's got you boy,
nerves got you boy,
till the path to this garden delivers its message,
its millions of faces
crying medic, crying mom, one of them whispering this was my home
once, right in there—
this hour—
in our garden—
where I look in my parents' eyes and see nothing but
a world addressed
face to face, nothing
but the surfaces of things
unbreakable,
all round us
the sun perjuring itself promising
the world cannot turn on you,
gold firing on every leaf and pane,
ricochet of sunstrikes on glass, twig, stone,
the wall of vines all mouths whispering *here you are here you are,*
fill your glass the promises shall be kept
& a quiet in the light, a quiet that cannot die,

over our repast in the garden,
my one fear that I would spill the glass
in the conflagration
of simplicities.
Those who will never walk again on this earth.
Those who will never walk again
in the shadows of the garden.
What did I become.
Oh, the future said, this train can go faster than this track can withstand,
why not,
we're heading out,
it's speed which is carrying us now,
the vehicle is an illusion,
the bend up ahead you keep squinting into, you can
forget it,
after the bend, wonders, after the bend
the soul will be made to expand—tongues—more tongues—so blue—
whispering a little life
a little more
that's the ticket
that one day
in the garden
at the small table,
it is coming on evening,
the blossoms have just fallen, all of them, all at once, a gust just came through,
we can still smell them,
the earth is white with their silks,
no decay taints or wrinkles
mother father child,
it must be Sunday,
the sun has not yet gone,
it fingers around the garden tending, selecting,
who is this speaking here,
the sun touches our jackets where the small boy who is me
must be hearing something,
something unheard of,
he wants to hear it,
he raises his arms out to his sides as if to cry out
but does not,
how happy we are he thinks,
how perfect they are,
my arms rising mid-reach above the blossoms,
my fingers stretching out,
the evening the blossoms the sun descending,
soon there will be a smile,
they will begin to smile
their rare smile,
all is what it seems I am thinking,
he is thinking,
the painter is thinking.
It is 1898.
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.

(Eduard Vuillard, *Repast In A Garden*, 1898)