

# All Things Are Dear That Disappear

Joshua Bennett

However, just as the sun shines on the godly and the ungodly alike, so does nuclear radiation. And with this knowledge it becomes increasingly difficult to embrace the thought of extinction purely for the assumed satisfaction of—from the grave—achieving revenge. Or even of accepting our demise as a planet as a simple and just preventative medicine administered to the universe. Life is better than death, I believe, if only because it is less boring, and because it has fresh peaches in it. In any case, Earth is my home—though for centuries white people have tried to convince me I have no right to exist, except in the dirtiest, darkest corners of the globe.

So let me tell you: I intend to protect my home.

—Alice Walker, “Only Justice Can Stop a Curse”

The division of matter into nonlife and life pertains not only to matter but to the racial organization of life as foundational to New World geographies. The biopolitical category of nonbeing is established through slaves being exchanged for and as gold. Slavery was a geologic axiom of the inhuman in which nonbeing was made, reproduced, and circulated as flesh.

—Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None*

*We are* now identified as those who are about to die. We who can die tomorrow. And therefore, I think, this is where modern scholarship must come in.

—Sylvia Wynter, “Afro-American Culture and Social Order”

Midway through June Jordan’s largely under-theorized reflection on black cognition—or, from another angle, what we might call black thought *as such*—“A Poem About Intelligence, For My Brothers and Sisters,” the poem’s speaker offers up an extended meditation on Albert Einstein’s role in the invention of the atomic bomb, as well as the symbolic import of that historical truth in a present-day conversation about the socially imposed, ostensibly antonymous, relationship between blackness and genius. Jordan writes:

Take Einstein  
being the most the unquestionable the outstanding  
the maximal mind of the century  
right?  
And I’m struggling against this lapse leftover  
from my Black childhood to fathom why  
anybody should say so:  
*E=mc squared?*  
I try that on this old lady live on my block:

She sweeping away Saturday night from the stoop  
 and mad as can be because some absolute  
 jackass have left a kingsize mattress where  
 she have to sweep around it stains and all she  
 don't want to know nothing about in the first place  
 "Mrs. Johnson!" I say, leaning on the gate  
 between us: "What you think about somebody come up  
 with an *E* equals *MC 2*?"  
 "How you doin," she answer me, sideways, like she don't  
 want to let on she know I ain'  
 combed my hair yet and here it is  
 Sunday morning but still I have the nerve  
 to be bothering serious work with these crazy  
 questions about  
 "*E* equals what you say again, dear?"  
 Then I tell her, "Well  
 also this same guy? I think  
 he was undisputed Father of the Atom Bomb!"<sup>1</sup>

Jordan goes on to further describe the interaction between the speaker and the neighbor they have unwittingly recruited into this conversation about ethics and legible intellect. One which doubles as a critique of the systematic derogation of the inner worlds of black folks, as well as the ubiquitous dis-valuing of the social practices and protocols which constitute the black social scene. Notice as well the way in which Jordan juxtaposes this conversation with the "serious work" that her neighbor is undertaking prior to her interruption. In Jordan's hands, this becomes a moment of reevaluation and repair, an occasion to celebrate the everyday intellectual labor of black women elders who might not have the time to, as my grandmother would phrase it, *study*—i.e., dedicate not only one's intellectual energies, but worry or concern— Einstein or his colleagues in large part because they have countless other matters to attend to, many of which are bound up with the care of others. In a number of divergent ways, this ethic of care is embodied at the level of the conversation itself:

"That right." She mumbles or grumbles, not too politely  
 "And dint remember to wear socks when he put on  
 his shoes!" I add on (getting desperate)  
 at which point Mrs. Johnson take herself and her broom  
 a very big step down the stoop away from me  
 "And never did nothing for nobody in particular  
 lessen it was a committee  
 and  
 used to say, 'What time is it?'

and  
you'd say, 'Six o'clock.'  
and  
he'd say, 'Day or night?'  
and  
and he never made nobody a cup a tea  
in his whole brilliant life!  
and  
[my voice rises slightly]  
and  
he dint never boogie neither: never!"

"Well," say Mrs. Johnson, "Well, honey,  
I do guess  
that's genius for you."<sup>2</sup>

The stakes of the conflict that Jordan outlines are fairly straightforward. On the one hand, there is a dominant, post-Enlightenment vision of human intelligence—one that Jordan elaborates upon here not only through remarking upon the historical relationship between the Albert Einstein and the atomic bomb, but also the sort of casual thoughtlessness she then ascribes to the metonymic historical figure she has built from the ground up—that is generally exclusionary, and thoroughly anti-black. What's more, Jordan seems to assert, however subtly, that there is a competing vision of mental acuity that leaves space for high-level cognition in its normative guises, as well as other, less legible, distinctly social forms such as cleaning up the neighborhood, dancing for no clear reason, or making a cup of tea for someone you love. These are examples of intelligence *by other names*. Brilliance in every shade you can imagine. The varied forms of social and emotional intelligence invoked by Jordan, at least as they appear within the universe of the poem, show up in the world as *care*, and often operate in meaningful contradistinction to more widely celebrated modes of intellection.

If the sort of brilliance we are inclined, socially and otherwise, to praise in Einstein—which, it bears mentioning, is not reducible to his legacy as an individual historical actor, but in fact represents a more general set of economic and political procedures through which scientific research comes to serve as cog and fuel for state-sponsored war machines the world over—has led to widespread, unchecked devastation by the instruments of American empire, then what other approaches might be available to us? How might we identify, and ultimately celebrate, the modes of creative praxis that Jordan positions against more legible, widely venerated expressions of aptitude, interiority, and intellectual labor?

It bears mentioning here that Jordan was not alone in her wisdom and willingness to forge a connection between a more general critique of nuclear

proliferation—one explicitly rooted in international solidarity with the darker peoples of the world—and attention to the specific, historically grounded ways in which the increase in the use of nuclear weapons in the U.S. served as an especially fearsome omen for Black Americans. As Vincent J. Intondi’s recent monograph, *African Americans Against the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Colonialism, and the Black Freedom Movement* reminds us, Jordan was part of an expansive tradition of Black writers and thinkers warning the world against the altogether ineluctable danger of atomic bombs in the hands of the U.S. government. Using W.E.B Du Bois as an exemplar of this particular segment of the black radical tradition, Intondi writes:

For Du Bois, the fact that the victims of the atomic bombings were nonwhite only further validated the idea that race, peace, and colonization were connected and the black freedom struggle was indeed global. In June 1946, Du Bois took part in a massive “Big Three Unity Rally” organized by the Council on African Affairs (CAA) at Madison Square Garden. Between 15,000 and 19,000 heard Du Bois, Robeson, Yergan, Mary McLeod Bethune [...] and others condemn the exploitation of Africa by colonial powers, especially the United States through its import of uranium to make atomic bombs.<sup>3</sup>

It’s critical, then, that we understand Jordan’s line of theorization in “Poem About Intelligence, For My Brothers and Sisters” as not only an extension, but an expansion, of the arguments forwarded by Du Bois, Roberson, Bethune and others: an instrumentalization of the poetic register and the myriad freedoms it provides to frame this ongoing political conflict vis-a-vis a conversation between herself and a beloved elder. In doing so, Jordan brings the global stakes of the questions Intondi forwards here into the realm of the everyday, offering an entry to point to those who might not be readily aware of this moment in the history of black freedom struggle and what it means for the ways we must necessarily approach contemporary questions around anti-blackness, black critical theory, and the specter of the end of Days. All of which is to say: we have been here before. We have always lived in the midst of a world at the brink, or just beyond it. Jordan reminds us that our present collective nightmare is not without precedent, and that just as sure as our worst fears can only be defeated once they are reckoned with, and imaginatively engaged, we likewise need not think that we are without the instruments we need in order to survive.

Following this line of inquiry, this essay will focus on the various ways in which Jordan’s writing about the atomic bomb, as well as other forms of pending ecological destruction, propel us toward a vision of black love as not only that which binds black people to one another, but that which serves as a bridge between black human beings and nonhuman life-worlds. This is a fraught proximity to be sure, but one that Jordan navigates with great care and unrestrained imagination, daring to say that, in the style of Luther Vandross, *the power of love* is not to be found in

the promise of safety or security, of a bond that lasts always, but rather the fact of our collective impermanence. I will focus primarily on two of Jordan's poems—alongside the aforementioned “Poem About Intelligence”—to undertake this larger endeavor: “On a New Year's Eve” and “From Sea to Shining Sea,” reading both works within the context of Jordan's wider oeuvre, as well as the wealth of resources made available by the recent environmental turn in Black literary studies; a shift characterized by a cooperative reckoning with the notion that, as my colleague Treva Ellison once phrased it in a dazzling riff on Cedric Robinson: *Black studies is an ecological critique of Western Civilization*.

I will argue that Jordan's poems represent an especially staunch version and vision of this particular critique, braiding environmental ethics and black poetics towards the ends of asserting the irreducible, always already present connection between the two, a timeless romance between black critical praxis and the stewardship of the Earth. Her assertion, it seems, is that these twin modes of reading the Word and the World operate in much the same vein as the way Bertrand Russell once defined philosophy itself, as the “No-Man's Land between theology of science.”<sup>[4]</sup> In this No Man's Land—which, in this context, bears the trace of course of Sylvia Wynter's ever-relevant intellectual project<sup>[5]</sup>—between the pursuit of the numinous and a *necessarily poetic* engagement with the sweeping range of modern scientific developments that made new, and increasingly pervasive, forms of ecological domination and devastation possible, Jordan crafts a timeless vision; a black terrapoetics of the land and sea and the untamable darkness underneath them. In a tradition indelibly marked by its careful attention to the opaque social spheres of nonhuman life forms, Jordan stands apart as a writer dually committed to both an aesthetics and a politics of solidarity across species and epoch: a *science of the Word*<sup>[6]</sup> in its most robust sense, the bladed edge of the black environmental imagination given language, vigor, and form.

\*\*\*

Via the work of its title alone, “On a New Year's Eve” begins in the spirit of celebration and possibilities yet unseen. We arrive halfway through the poem, however, in altogether divergent territory, grappling with the constraints placed on human love by the masters of global capital and their ecocidal logics:

the temporary is the sacred  
takes me out

and even the stars and even the snow and even  
the rain  
do not amount to much unless these things submit to some disturbance  
some derangement such  
as when I yield myself/belonging  
to your unmistakable

body

and let the powerful lock up the canyon/mountain  
peaks the  
hidden rivers/waterfalls the  
deepdown minerals/the coalfields/goldfields  
diamond mines close by the whoring ore  
hot  
at the center of the earth

spinning fast as numbers  
I cannot imagine

let the world blot  
obliterate remove so-  
called  
magnificence  
so-called  
almighty/fathomless and everlasting  
treasures/  
wealth  
(whatever that may be)

it is this time  
that matters

it is this history  
I care about<sup>7</sup>

What we might at first read as a certain anthropocentrism in the mind of the speaker—i.e., “it is this history/I care about” as a singular concern with *human history*, the interpersonal connection between this speaker and the beloved over and against the natural history of the dying landscape described throughout the poem in vivid detail—in broader context reveals itself as an ethos grounded in a shared sense of *precariousness*, the deeply held knowledge that those who are called black and the most vulnerable forms of life on Earth are intertwined in their experience of making do at the cusp of destruction. Put another way, what Jordan highlights here is the sort of love that emerges in a state of emergency, the bonds that are built when we know that death can come at any moment. The time that matters, the line appears to imply, is the time we spend imagining another order of things in concert with one another. When the speaker proclaims that “the temporary is sacred,” we are meant to read this claim as an overturning of dominant cosmology. Rather than living our life in constant, dogged pursuit of the eternal—at least within the scope,

or else on and in the terms, of a temporality we can fathom from within this present mortal envelope—Jordan avers that we must, alongside Baby Suggs<sup>8</sup> and others, love the flesh, and celebrate it precisely for the fact of its transience. This is the very essence of what we might properly think of as *black time*, the time of blackness, a window into the temporal imagination of those who live on borrowed time, and often in persevering communion with those who are also vulnerable and not long for this world, hunted by forces which lay claim to the bounty of both the heavens and the here-and-now. To hold the temporary as sacred is to invert a system of value in which one invests only in that which lasts, accrues worth over time, or can contribute to the glory and strength of an individual legacy. Jordan spurns such well-worn truisms for a fleeting, momentary allegiance, one that puts her at risk of losing everything she might lay claim to, including her very life.

Considered within this frame, what does black sociality make available to our understanding of our relationship not necessarily to some all-encompassing vision of the environment, but ecological catastrophe in particular?<sup>9</sup> In the time of blackness, how does catastrophe more generally register, and what larger lessons might be gleaned from that archive of brutal cataclysm and astonishing improvisation? For Jordan, it appears, a poetry specifically attuned to the dying world is one means through which we might access, or else invent, a critical vocabulary for black feeling, might assert the breaking into the mortal plane of a black love that is both resistance and that which exceeds it, love as a sort of black operation, black love as an act of *marronage*:

I have rejected propaganda teaching me  
about the beautiful  
the truly rare

(supposedly  
the soft push of the ocean at the hushpoint of the shore  
supposedly  
the soft push of the ocean at the hushpoint of the shore  
is beautiful  
for instance)  
but  
the truly rare can stay out there

I have rejected that  
abstraction that enormity  
unless I see a dog walk on the beach/  
a bird seize sandflies  
or yourself  
approach me  
laughing out a sound to spoil  
the pretty picture  
make an uncontrolled

heartbeating memory  
instead

I read the papers preaching on  
that oil and oxygen  
that redwoods and the evergreens  
that trees the waters and the atmosphere  
compile a final listing of the world in  
short supply

but all alive and all the lives  
persist perpetual  
in jeopardy  
persist  
as scarce as every one of us  
as difficult to find  
or keep  
as irreplaceable  
as frail  
as every one of us

and  
as I watch your arm/your  
brown arm  
just before it moves

I know

all things are dear  
that disappear

all things are dear  
that disappear<sup>10</sup>

This is where black love lives: in the knowledge that black people often do not live for very long, and ergo must cultivate modes of celebration, habits of assembly, that honor this historical circumstance. To persist in blackness is to live and love at the edge of life itself; to feel the pressure of the bulls-eye's glare and nonetheless press on. It is likewise to reject what the speaker calls "propaganda," the state-sponsored miseducation that might inculcate us with false and altogether life-negating visions of the beautiful. And this, of course, is the point at which the world of the poem and the work of the poem cross paths. The poem itself embodies and enacts the very work that this line describes: the active rejection of systems of value rooted in deficiency. Rather, the speaker seems to say, we must turn toward the infinite resources we have in each other, the *affective* resources one cultivates when an entire

order is built upon the derogation, and ultimately denial, of our very personhood. We do not have to look to the natural world in order to understand endangerment as a dominant frame, nor must we regard that framing as the only one worthy of our intellectual energies, whether at the level of allegiance or deconstructive critique. Indeed, what we find here—in varied moments of intimacy between persons that have been historically made *the sociolegal equivalent of things*—is a kind of countervailing force against this derogative interpretive lens. There is a transformative potential made available to us when we linger with the plenitude produced by those who know no other life apart from what the world would call precarious, though they call it by a host of other, more beautiful, more terrible names.

At the intersection of the interpersonal and the planetary, we discover here an alternative approach to imagining the space between life and death, apocalypse and infinite possibility. For Jordan, meaningful attention to the anguish of the Earth is best cultivated through a kind of robust meditative practice, a thinking of the environment not as an unknowable expanse at a great distance, but as an ornate web of collectivities crashing into us from all sides, a daily encounter with obscure and unheralded forms only made legible in the briefest gasp or glimpse, our vision splintered by the very nature of our all too human remove. This is the abstraction that the speaker rejects: the world rendered altogether impersonal and untouchable. And this alongside a widespread ideological emphasis on both ecological and economic scarcity, which within the world of the poem obscures the revolutionary, revelatory potential of living in the break between the good life and the everyday gambit of barely surviving a landscape structured, narratively and otherwise, around one's social, civic, and biological death.

The anaphora of the last four lines helps drive Jordan's central set of questions home: for those of us barred from the province of Man, how do we craft a critical lexicon of beauty, or value? For those forms of life misread as dead and dying, what is the relationship between precariousness and *preciousness*, cherishment and certain doom? Through the consistent use of both enjambment and repetition throughout (*all things are dear that disappear* as the longing, whispered echo at poem's end) Jordan re-creates this sense of pure velocity, the sensation that we are, collectively, as a species racing towards the end of things at breakneck speed. The poem's structure calls for us to lose ourselves in that pure thrill rather than pause for breath, or else in order to take a proper, exhaustive account of the landscape surrounding us. Instead, not unlike the poem's speaker, we are called to look nowhere else but in the eyes of the one right in front of us. The one we must claim responsibility for: the ever-present, irreducibly opaque other, to whom we owe everything.

\*\*\*

*What we call the world today is not only the convergence of the histories of peoples that has swept away the claims of the philosophies of History but also the encounters (in consciousness) among these histories and materialities of the planet. Catastrophic fires reactivate the work of genocides, famines and droughts take*

*root in suicidal political regimes; warring parties defoliate on a staggering scale; floods and hurricanes call forth international solidarity, yet no one can prevent them or really combat their effects [...] The woes of the landscape have invaded speech, rekindling the woes of humanities, in order to conceive of it. Can we bear ad infinitum this rambling on of knowledge? Can we get our minds off it?*

—Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*

First published in her 1985 collection, the aptly titled *Living Room*, June Jordan’s “From Sea to Shining Sea” is a tour de force. The poem is one that displays her extensive array of skills as a poet seemingly all at once, e.g., her adeptness at moving between register, her ear for internal rhyme, and her willingness to pivot deftly between the ecological, the personal, and the explicitly sociopolitical, in the process exposing the disciplinary tendency to separate the three as not only arbitrary, but in and of itself an expression of the dominant order’s most violent protocols:

*This was not a good time to live in Queens*

Trucks carrying explosive nuclear wastes will  
exit from the Long Island Expressway and then  
travel through residential streets of Queens  
en route to the 59th Street Bridge, and so on.

*This was not a good time to live in Arkansas*

Occasional explosions caused by mystery  
nuclear missiles have been cited  
as cause for local alarm, among  
other things.

*This was not a good time to live in Grand Forks North Dakota*

Given the presence of a United States' nuclear  
missile base in Grand Forks North Dakota  
the non-military residents of the area feel  
that they live only a day to day distance from certain  
annihilation, etcetera.<sup>11</sup>

As was the case in “On a New Year’s Eve,” we begin with the question of temporality, *low life*<sup>12</sup> as that which is lived in a perpetual state of flight from one exigency to the next. In the intricate dance from stanza to stanza, the speaker crafts a map that spans the continental United States, these three, disparate locations—which, bear in mind are each of a fundamentally different kind: the most diverse borough in NYC, an entire state, and a city of 57,000 people in the Dakotas—which stand in for a network of unnamed populations similarly brutalized by the everyday reality of environmental injustice. The repetition of the phrase “This was not a good time”

carries within its body a more than a considerable measure of irony. The implication, of course, is that there is never a good time to be poor or live in close proximity to a nuclear missile testing site, or a toxic waste dump, or a factory pumping poisonous gas into the air your children breathe. What Jordan is able to undertake in “From Sea to Shining Sea” is the creation of a commons where we might not otherwise imagine one, a collective organized not around any visibly shared identity or sense of history, but simply their present-day proximity to weapons with the power to destroy the world as we know it multiple times over. The speaker takes this thinking several steps further in the poem’s closing sections:

This was not a good time to be a tree  
This was not a good time to be a river  
This was not a good time to be found with a gun  
This was not a good time to be found without one  
This was not a good time to be gay  
This was not a good time to be Black  
This was not a good time to be a pomegranate  
or an orange  
This was not a good time to be against  
the natural order

— Wait a minute —

I am turning under the trees  
I am trailing blood into the rivers  
I am walking loud along the streets  
I am digging my nails and my heels into the land  
I am opening my mouth  
I am just about to touch the pomegranates  
piled up precarious

This is a good time  
This is the best time This is the only time to come together  
Fractious  
Kicking  
Spilling  
Burly  
Whirling  
Raucous  
Messy  
Free

Exploding like the seeds of a natural disorder.<sup>13</sup>

The word “natural” both closes and opens the poem—its first line is “natural order is being restored” which simultaneously bears the trace, perhaps, of both the strikingly paradoxical and the explicitly biopolitical—and works to stunning effect. In the words of the poet Jamaal May, “pomegranate means grenade,”<sup>14</sup> after all, (May is playing on the historical relationship between the weapon and the fruit at the level of both etymology and anatomy) and we see that sort of dexterity at work here in the final lines of the Jordan poem as well. Jordan coins an entirely new phrase, “natural disorder,” to describe the multivalent coalition of figures she has just assembled: human and nonhuman, living and nonliving, river and tree and pomegranate all gathered under the aegis of blackness and its magnetic power. This passage serves, in another register, as an evocative instance of what Fred Moten, Nahum Chandler and others would call the “paraontological distinction”<sup>15</sup> between blackness and black people, a distinction which, when taken seriously, opens up space for us to think about *blackened forms of life and nonlife* alongside Jordan. All of these named actors persist in “a certain day to day distance from annihilation”<sup>16</sup> and are, on this basis alone, usefully imagined as existing in a kind of perpetual, agonizing, astonishing solidarity. In this scene, The Negro speaks of rivers on the basis of proximity.<sup>17</sup> An antecedent to what Bill Brown would later term “thing theory”<sup>18</sup>—and what the aforementioned Moten will gesture toward two years later, when he describes the history of blackness as “a testament to the fact that objects can and do resist”<sup>19</sup>—is presaged here, elaborated beautifully in Jordan’s poetics of precariousness. Across borders of experience and opacity, between black social life and blackness as the condition of an ever-expanding array of beings, there exists the possibility of not only collaboration, but revolutionary action. In the blur of our shared proximity to utter devastation, an alternative order of operations emerges, and a sociality without edges in its wake.

## Endnotes

1. June Jordan, "A Poem About Intelligence for My Brothers and Sisters," *Literature: The Human Experience*. 3rd ed. Ed. Richard Abcarian and Marvin Klotz. New York: St. Martin's 35 (1982).
2. Ibid.
3. Vincent J. Intondi, *African Americans Against the Bomb: Nuclear Weapons, Colonialism, and the Black Freedom Movement*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015.
4. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy: Collectors edition*. Routledge, 2013.
5. See Sylvia Wynter, "Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument," *CR: The new centennial review* vol. 3, no. 3 (2003): 257-337.
6. See Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and knowledge," *Sulfur* 5 (1982), 17.
7. June Jordan, *Directed by Desire: The Collected Poems of June Jordan*. United States: Copper Canyon Press, 2012, 202.
8. Toni Morrison, *Beloved*. Spain: Vintage International, 2004, 104.
9. Sonya Posmentier, *Cultivation and Catastrophe: The Lyric Ecology of Modern Black Literature*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017.
10. Jordan, *Directed by Desire*, 202.

11. *Ibid.*, 325.
12. See Joshua Bennett, *Being Property Once Myself: Blackness and the End of Man*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020, 154.
13. Jordan, *Directed by Desire*, 325.
14. See Jamaal May, *Hum*. Farmington, ME: Alice James Books, 2014, 53.
15. Fred Moten, "Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh)." *South Atlantic Quarterly* vol. 112, no. 4 (2013): 749.
16. Jordan, *Directed by Desire*, 325.
17. Here, I am alluding to the canonical Langston Hughes poem. See Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995, 23.
18. Bill Brown, "Thing Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (2001), 1-22.
19. Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003, 1.