

Reading Poetry April 18, 2023: Joy Harjo

*Eagle Poem*

To pray you open your whole self  
To sky, to earth, to sun, to moon  
To one whole voice that is you.  
And know there is more  
That you can't see, can't hear;  
Can't know except in moments  
Steadily growing, and in languages  
That aren't always sound but other  
Circles of motion.  
Like eagle that Sunday morning  
Over Salt River. Circled in blue sky  
In wind, swept our hearts clean  
With sacred wings.  
We see you, see ourselves and know  
That we must take the utmost care  
And kindness in all things.  
Breathe in, knowing we are made of  
All this, and breathe, knowing  
We are truly blessed because we  
Were born, and die soon within a  
True circle of motion,  
Like eagle rounding out the morning  
Inside us.  
We pray that it will be done  
In beauty.  
In beauty.

(1990)

*Insomnia and the Seven Steps to Grace*

At dawn the panther of the heavens peers over the edge of the world. She hears the stars gossip with the sun, sees the moon washing her lean darkness with water electrified by prayers. All over the world there are those who can't sleep, those who never awaken.

My granddaughter sleeps on the breast of her mother with milk on her mouth. A fly contemplates the sweetness of lactose.

Her father is wrapped in the blanket of nightmares. For safety he approaches the red hills near Thoreau. They recognize him and sing for him.

Her mother has business in the house of chaos. She is a prophet disguised as a young mother who is looking for a job. She appears at the door of my dreams and we put the house back together.

Panther watches as human and animal souls are lifted to the heavens by rain clouds to partake of songs of beautiful thunder.

Others are led by deer and antelope in the wistful hours to the villages of their ancestors. There they eat cornmeal cooked with berries that stain their lips with purple while the tree of life flickers in the sun.

It's October, though the season before dawn is always winter. On the city streets of this desert town lit by chemical yellow travelers search for home.

Some have been drinking and intimate with strangers. Others are escapees from the night shift, sip lukewarm coffee, shift gears to the other side of darkness.

One woman stops at a red light, turns over a worn tape to the last chorus of a whispery blues. She has decided to live another day.

The stars take notice, as do the half-asleep flowers, prickly pear and chinaberry tree who drink exhaust into their roots, into the earth.

She guns the light to home where her children are asleep and may never know she ever left. That their fate took a turn in the land of nightmares toward the sun may be untouchable knowledge.

It is a sweet sound.

The panther relative yawns and puts her head between her paws. She dreams of the house of panthers and the seven steps to grace.

(1996)

## *Rabbit is Up to Tricks*

In a world long before this one, there was enough for everyone,  
Until somebody got out of line.  
We heard it was Rabbit, fooling around with clay and wind.  
Everybody was tired of his tricks and no one would play with him;  
He was lonely in this world.  
So Rabbit thought to make a person.  
And when he blew into the mouth of the crude figure to see  
What would happen,  
The clay man stood up.  
Rabbit showed the clay man how to steal a chicken.  
The clay man obeyed.  
Rabbit showed him how to steal corn.  
The clay man obeyed.  
Then he showed him how to steal someone else's wife.  
The clay man obeyed.  
Rabbit felt important and powerful.  
Clay man felt important and powerful.  
And once that clay man started he could not stop.  
Once he took that chicken he wanted all the chickens.  
And once he took that corn he wanted all the corn.  
And once he took that wife, he wanted all the wives.  
He was insatiable.  
Then he had a taste of gold and he wanted all the gold.  
Then it was land and anything else he saw.  
His wanting only made him want more.  
Soon it was countries, then it was trade.  
The wanting infected the earth.  
We lost track of the purpose and reason for life.  
We began to forget our songs.  
We forgot our stories.  
We could no longer see or hear our ancestors,  
Or talk with each other across the kitchen table.  
Forests were being mowed down all over the world.  
And Rabbit had no place to play.  
Rabbit's trick had backfired.

Rabbit tried to call the clay man back.  
But when the clay man wouldn't listen,  
Rabbit realized he'd made a clay man with no ears.

(2015)

*Redbird Love*

We watched her grow up.  
She was the urgent chirper,  
Fledgling flier.  
And when spring rolled  
Out its green  
She'd grown  
Into the most noticeable  
Bird-girl.  
Long-legged and just  
The right amount of blush  
Tipping her wings, crest  
And tail, and  
She knew it  
In the bird parade.  
We watched her strut.  
She owned her stuff.  
The males perked their armor, greased their wings,  
And flew sky-loop missions  
To show off  
For her.  
In the end  
There was only one.  
Isn't that how it is for all of us?  
There's that one you circle back to — for home.  
This morning  
The young couple scavenges seeds  
On the patio.  
She is thickening with eggs.  
Their minds are busy with sticks the perfect size, tufts of fluff  
Like dandelion, and other pieces of soft.  
He steps aside for her, so she can eat.  
Then we watch him fill his beak  
Walk tenderly to her and kiss her with seed.  
The sacred world lifts up its head  
To notice —  
We are double-, triple-blessed. (2017)

*How to Write a Poem in a Time of War*  
*You can't begin just anywhere. It's a wreck.*

Shrapnel and the eye

Of a house, a row of houses. There's a rat scrambling

From light with fleshy trash in its mouth. A baby strapped to its mother's  
back

Cut loose.

Soldiers crawl the city,

The river, the town, the village,

The bedroom, our kitchen. They eat everything.  
Or burn it.

They kill what they cannot take. They rape. What they cannot kill they take.

Rumors fall like rain.

Like bombs.

Like mother and father tears swallowed for restless peace.

Like sunset slanting toward a moonless midnight.

Like a train blown free of its destination.      Like a seed fallen where

There is no chance of trees      or anyplace      for birds to live.

*No, start here.*

*Deer peer from the edge of the woods.*

We used to see woodpeckers

The size of the sun, redbirds, and were greeted

By chickadees with their good morning songs.

We'd started to cook outside slippery with dew and laughter, ah those  
smoky sweet sunrises.

We tried to pretend war wasn't going to happen.

Though they began building their houses all around us and demanding  
more.

They started teaching our children their god's story,

A story in which we'd always be slaves.

*No. Not here.*

*You can't begin here.*

*This is memory shredded because it is impossible to hold by words, even  
poetry.*

These memories were left here with the trees:

The torn pocket of your daughter's hand-sewn dress,

The sash, the lace.

The baby's delicately beaded moccasin still connected to the foot,

A young man's note of promise to his beloved —



*No! This is not the best place to begin.*

Everyone was asleep, despite the distant bombs. Terror had become the familiar stranger.

Our beloved twin girls curled up in their nightgowns, next to their father and me.

*If we begin here, none of us will make it to the end*

*Of the poem.*

Someone has to make it out alive, sang a grandfather to his grandson,

His granddaughter, as he blew his most powerful song into the hearts of the children.

There it would be hidden from the soldiers,

Who would take them miles, rivers, mountains from the navel cord place

Of the origin story.

He knew one day, far day, the grandchildren would return, generations later

Over slick highways                      constructed over old trails

Through walls of laws meant to hamper or destroy, over the libraries of

The ancestors in the winds, born in stones.

His song brings us to his home place in these smoky hills.

*Begin here.*

(2017)

*An American Sunrise*

We were running out of breath, as we ran out to meet ourselves. We were surfacing the edge of our ancestors' fights, and ready to strike. It was difficult to lose days in the Indian bar if you were straight. Easy if you played pool and drank to remember to forget. We made plans to be professional — and did. And some of us could sing so we drummed a fire-lit pathway up to those starry stars. Sin was invented by the Christians, as was the Devil, we sang. We were the heathens, but needed to be saved from them — thin chance. We knew we were all related in this story, a little gin will clarify the dark and make us all feel like dancing. We had something to do with the origins of blues and jazz I argued with a Pueblo as I filled the jukebox with dimes in June, forty years later and we still want justice. We are still America. We know the rumors of our demise. We spit them out. They die soon.

(2017)