

JOY HARJO




HOW WE
BECAME HUMAN

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS: 1975 – 2001

How We Became Human

J O Y H A R J O

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HOW WE BECAME HUMAN

NEW AND SELECTED POEMS: 1975–2001

This collection offers a selection of Joy Harjo's body of work, including poems from *She Had Some Horses* and *Mad Love and War*. Known for her signature blend of storytelling, prayer, and song, her work draws from the American tradition of praising the land and the spirit. She began writing in 1973 in the age marked by the takeover at Wounded Knee and the rejuvenation of world indigenous cultures through poetry and music. Recognized today as one of our foremost American poets, Harjo has created a necessary volume that explores how we became human in poems of sustaining grace.

RUSHING THE PALI

*We can sing ourselves
to the store or eternity as surely
as we were born into
this world naked and smeared
with blood and fight.
No time to keep putting it off
these thoughts of the holy
first one petal, and then
another, like sunrise
over the Pacific
until there is a perfect human.*

JOY HARJO belongs to the Muscogee Nation and is the author of six poetry books: *A Map to the Next World*, *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*, *In Mad Love and War*, *Secrets from*



the Center of the World, *She Had Some Horses*, and *What Moon Drove Me to This?* With Gloria Bird, she coedited *Reinventing the Enemy's Language: Contemporary Native Women's Writings of North America*. Her honors include a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas, an Oklahoma Book Award, a Western American Literature Lifetime Achievement Award, and grants from the National Endowment for the Arts. She lives in Honolulu, Hawaii, teaches at UCLA, and travels frequently throughout the United States playing the saxophone with her band.

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BOOKS BY JOY HARJO

The Last Song (chapbook)

What Moon Drove Me to This?

She Had Some Horses

Secrets from the Center of the World (with Stephen Strom)

In Mad Love and War

Fishing (chapbook)

The Woman Who Fell from the Sky

Reinventing the Enemy's Language (coeditor)

A Map to the Next World: Poems and Tales

The Good Luck Cat

MUSIC BY JOY HARJO

Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century

For my sisters and brothers, by blood and by love

For my allies, and for my enemies

For my heart

What kind of nation is this
Deleting love from its curriculum
The art of poetry
The mystery of women's eyes
What kind of nation is this
Battling each rain cloud . . .

—Nizzar Kabbani

A C K N O W L E D G M E N T S

This work has been supported through the years by so many and so much it is not possible to name everyone. You know who you are, and many of you may not know who you are—this includes all who have ferried me to and from airports, have cooked and cleaned and carried the trash, for all those who continue to read, think, and dream in poetry.

And for those who have supported the poetry by nurturing it, by publishing it, the list is long and includes: Puerto del Sol Press from New Mexico State University; Ishmael Reed and Steve Cannon of their imprint I. Reed Books, a press that started many of us on our careers; Neil Ortenberg and crew at Thunder's Mouth Press, now part of Avalon; Larry Evers and Ofelia Zepeda and everyone else at the University of Arizona Press; Wesleyan University Press (and Tom Radko there), who continues to publish fine poetry; Ox Head Press; Jill Bialosky, who has faithfully birthed my books of poetry into the world, and W. W. Norton, who continues to give important attention to poetry; and Laura Coltelli, a soulmate of poetry who has translated several of these books into Italian and has given them a place in her most beloved country. *Grazie. Mvto.* Thank you.

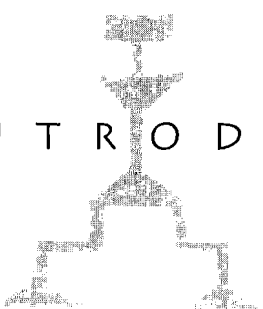
And for all those who helped with the compilation and research for notes, including Maggi Michel, Rainy Ortiz, George Coser Jr., Simon Ortiz, Lurline McGregor, Carmen Foghorn, Karen and Stephen Strom, Patsy Mae Jojola, Laura Coltelli, Carolyn Dunn, Tim Chee, Sue Williams, Nadema Agard, Craig Womack, Father John Staudenmaier, and Pam

Uschuk and Bill Root, who helped me find the title as well as gave advice with notes while Mars slowly circled.

My family is huge and grows each journey I make into the world. There would be no poetry without them. This includes my sister Margaret Ann Barrows, who inspires her students at Liberty Mounds School to write poetry. She has always been by my side through the terrible tests of childhood, through the making of poetry. And my sister Sandy Aston, who gave me love when there appeared to be little. And welcome, our newly found sister Debbie. And my brothers Allen and Boyd Foster. I do poetry and music. They do cars and trucks. And Greg Sarris, for your love, your stories. And Debra Haaland, your chile and kindnesses sustain me. I thank you Phil for your humor, and belief in me, and Rainy for your compassionate vision, your love and Ratonina for your bravery. And the two new souls who have joined us on this road of poetry: my grandsons Tayo and Chayson; my cousins George Coser Jr. and Pete Coser; and my family at the Tvlvhasse Ceremonial Grounds including Sam and David Proctor, Craig, Gerardo, Joyce and all the rest.

I cannot forget the gifts from the Indian school years, from the jazzers in Denver, from Simon Ortiz, June Jordan, Audre Lorde, Diane Reyna, Rosalyn Drexler, Rain Parrish, Pat Jojola, Ron Rogers, Geary Hobson, Quincy Troupe, Larry Emerson, Ali Darwish and Cairo and my relatives there; from this beloved island of O'ahu and the Hawaiian people here; for Lesline Conner, for Keone Nunes, for Bill and Mary Tiger. Thank you Barbara and all the HT family. And all the horses, especially Casey—here's a thank-you in horse language.

And to all elements that make petit déjeuner in Paris and in Papeete, Tahiti, with Wailana, possible. *Mvto*. For Lurline Wailana McGregor, you know how I mean. *Mahalo*. To the Pacific, the earth and sky. And to all the other family who have inspired me as I searched for poetry. *Mvto*. For my mother, who is at the center of this journey. And my father. I thank you for this life, this breath. *Mvto*. May I return it with *vnokeckv* (love).



I N T R O D U C T I O N

It was around the time we lost Larry Casuse to the racist guns of the Gallup police. He and Robert Nakaidinae emerged from the mayor's office, where they had been holding the mayor hostage for crimes against Indian people. They came out with their hands up. The police shot to kill anyway. This wasn't anything new, but now the hatred had come out into the open. It was erupting.

I was losing it, my car kept trying to drive itself off the road, and at any moment I would shatter. I was a broke Indian student with small children, immersed in painting and drawing classes at the University of New Mexico, trying to make it through a relationship with someone with whom I felt a powerful kinship, but who, too, was caught in the undertow of a few centuries of this country's denial. He responded by drinking with such a vigor as if to kill himself and then the anger would overflow. He would either disappear to rage or sing or tell stories that overwhelmed with their intense velocity, or he would attempt to tear down the house. My response was to turn inward with the snap of the wave, and I shivered to a breakdown, to an earthquake of the heart. I could not swallow without great difficulty, and had to calculate each step forward, literally so it was quite a feat to get the stroller loaded with books, paints, diapers, and lunchpails and make it the three blocks to the university and day care.

Sometimes I joined in the revelry in the bars or after hours and drank to obliterate the pain. A memory bleeds through of a bar on the main street of downtown, before downtown had been gentrified. Above the door was a sign that always cracked us up: THROUGH THESE DOORS WALK SOME OF THE FINEST PEOPLE IN THE WORLD. The memory is smokey, as is the bar and we seem like ghosts as we dance to the jukebox or play pool or fight. In my memory I am whirling in a sea of dancers in cowboy hats and long black hair. I feel like a ghost as I return to this memory, returning in a different body, in a different time. There's a crash of glass as a pitcher slams against the wall, barely missing someone's head. The two men struggle and in their wake is a path of broken chairs, tossed barstools, old girlfriends, and uncried tears. A pool of blood looks black in mercury lighting and I can't remember anything.

Otherwise I kept painting, and after I had cooked dinner, given the children their baths, and put them to bed I was free to roam in the disappearance zone, into the realm of creativity, idea, and follow design, curve, and meaning out of the disturbance and the world of sharp edges, to sense and beauty. This place was familiar to me. When I was three or four I took chalk and made the slate-walled garage into a mural. I took crayons and decorated the closet in the bedroom shared by my two brothers and sister. Always my art took place in private places, in the dark, far from public view. Even then, it was what I wanted to do with my life, "to be an artist," I always answered.

In the Mvskoke world women are accepted as painters, artists. To make art (whether it be painting, drawing, songs, stories—any art) is to replicate the purpose of original creation. My favorite aunt Lois Harjo Ball was a painter, as was my grandmother Naomi Harjo Foster. I grew up with my grandmother's art on the walls of our home, until our father left and took all of it with him when he fled after the divorce. He took all except for a charcoal of two horses running in a storm, a copy she had done of a popular image of her time. Lois kept up her painting through

the years, though painted less the few years before her death in a nursing home in Okmulgee. My grandmother died when my father was young but left quite a few paintings. Many of their paintings are in the collection of the Creek Council House Museum.

During that time of becoming a painter I went into Langell's art store to buy supplies and canvas. In the aisle for oil paints I recognized Pablita Velarde, the well-known Pueblo painter who was also shopping for supplies. She smiled at me and said hello, gave a recognition of me as a fellow Indian woman artist. That brief encounter gave me a shot of courage that lasted for days. I shone and I kept going.

At the pinnacle of the breakdown I was in the student union at lunchtime with some of my Kiva Club friends. They dragged me over to an older Indian woman who was psychic; they told me she helped the police find missing people. I was curious, and somewhat reluctant. No one knew that I was near suicide, no one knew that even as we were speaking with each other I was counting steps and giving my body instructions on how to move so that I would not whirl and fall apart. I cannot. I cannot, I told myself in a small internal voice, because I have children who are relying on me and there would be no one there if it all fell apart. She opened my palm then quickly closed it. She saw it all, and I saw her see it all. She told me to be careful, to take care of myself.

Here is where poetry showed up, at this intersection of a glimmer of self-knowledge and the need to make art of whatever materials are at hand. Poetry approached me in that chaos of raw inverted power and leaned over and tapped me on the shoulder, said, "You need to learn how to listen, you need grace, you need to learn how to speak. You're coming with me." I did not walk off into the sunset with poetry, or hit the town with a blaze of gunfire with poetry guarding my back. Rather, the journey toward poetry worked exactly as the process of writing a poem. It started from the inside out, then turned back in to complete a movement. And then on and on in the manner of a ripple in water, a song in the air.

This was the first poetry, the raw questioning, the falling-in-love-with-poetry poetry, the open-your-eyes-and-ears poetry, the first-legs-of-a-newborn-creature poetry. It started here, with a glimmer, a thought, the need to speak, with an impulse fed by history, dream, myth (that is, myth as an archetypal reality, not as falsehood), belief, and most of all faith. This poetry made roots from the compelling need to speak, to hear, to walk gracefully from one century to the next—despite the lines at the food stamp office, changing diapers, writing papers for classes, organizing for political action—without the luxury of a wife, a washer and dryer, a cook or nanny or a known library of publications by Indian writers. These were the early poems of the chapbook, *The Last Song*, sewn together at a table at David Apodaca's kitchen in Las Cruces, New Mexico, and the book that followed from Ishmael Reed and Steve Cannon's press, I. Reed Books, *What Moon Drove Me to This?* It was a poetry that could not have been written without the mentoring of Simon Ortiz, an Acoma poet—who when he told me he was an Indian poet, probably at some meeting at the National Indian Youth Council where he worked with Gerry Wilkinson, I wanted to ask, What is that? but I didn't dare. His poetry was the opening. It was shortly after that time I met the Laguna Pueblo poet and writer Leslie Silko, who came home to New Mexico for a visit, to get out of the rain of Ketchikan, Alaska, where she was writing her first novel, *Ceremony*. Her poetry and stories inspired me, gave form and sensibility to my early writing. And then Scott Momaday, the Kiowa writer who was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for his groundbreaking novel, *House Made of Dawn*, who came to speak at the University of Iowa where I was a graduate student—his writing and speaking taught me lessons in eloquence, dignity. And James Welch, the Blackfeet poet and writer who made me laugh despite the terrible lessons of being Indian in this country, and then the Oneida poet Roberta Hill, whose complex, tough, and beautiful poetry led me to the poet Richard Hugo—his poetry taught me that becoming human was the most honorable task of poetry.

It was in 1979 when I was teaching at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe and in the middle of writing the poems of what would become *She Had Some Horses*, that I squeezed as many creative writing students as I could into my small Japan-made truck and we headed to Albuquerque to spend the day with Richard Hugo, who was giving a writing workshop and a reading at the University of New Mexico. Though Hugo was already a legend to me, I didn't expect his luminosity, the shine of his compassion. He was generous with my students and they were moved by his reading that night to a packed house. That language has color, weight, breath and garnered as much presence as a painting, jewelry, or any other of their arts—that poetry is a river of history moving through the blood tree of the body was his gift to them that night. I can still see them lined up along the back row of the auditorium, listening to Hugo's poems and the poignant and witty stories that accompanied his poems. As we gathered up to leave someone asked, "Where's Yazzie?"* "She's at Okie's," someone answered. So, I drove to Okie's first, to retrieve Yazzie, a brilliant young Navajo woman majoring in pottery, who was there but not there. Half of her soul was enmeshed in the internal battle of what am I in this place of loss and heartbreak? How do I bear the weight of my soul?

The struggle was private, disturbing. We were always concerned about her. Would she make it? And what does "make it" mean in the whole scheme of the world? Perhaps "not making it" in one world was food for making it in another. When her spirit broke free she was tattered, raw, and beautiful.

That night, then, became a Richard Hugo poem: a truck of Indian students headed to Okie Joe's bar to retrieve a lost beloved one in a land that had been taken from us—a land no one could own. I sent a student in to find Yazzie. He didn't return. I then sent the next volunteer, then

* Not her real name.

the next until I was the only one left, and had to go into that place to bring everyone home. Everyone came, but Yazzie. We couldn't find her. She eventually found herself, but not that night, not for many nights.

And in those earlier years there were many poets: Leo Romero, the poet from Chacon who fostered my journey toward poetry, when I doubted it. He successfully made the leap back and forth between drawing and writing. Ishmael Reed and his multicultural gatherings, including my first visit to New York City in the late seventies where I heard Jayne Cortez perform, and gained sustenance from the various poets in that gathering: from Puerto Rican to Irish to Filipino to Chicano to Jewish to African-American, a gathering of inclusion. Not long after I was invited to the One World Poetry Festival in Amsterdam and I realized there were many poetries from all over the world, just as there were, I was learning, poetry in all of the native tribes of North America, over five hundred viable tribal groups. Poetry was not under the ownership or province of Europe or New England, though it often appeared otherwise. Something was born in that realization, given life. It was like the shock of first learning the earth was not flat as many generations before you had assumed, but round. Or now that the world is neither flat nor round but in the shape of a spiral, the shape of the mind of God.

There were many poets whose poetry sustained me in those times, and continue to sustain me: Pablo Neruda, June Jordan, Amos Tutuola, Jean Toomer, Ricardo Sanchez, Judy Grahn, Galway Kinnell, Audre Lorde, William Butler Yeats, Lawson Inada, García Lorca, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath, Okot p'Bitek. They are part of an overlapping circle.

Until then, writing poetry had not been an option, especially as a career, an occupation, a journey for life. Riding bulls was a possibility, being a car mechanic or sheet-metal worker like my father, a tribal chief like my grandfather, a cook and waitress like my mother or even a painter, like my aunt and grandmother. Becoming a wife and mother was primary, a career was something that happened at divorce for my

mother's relatives who were poor. My grandmother and aunt had the option to be artists because oil was discovered on their allotted lands. They had options that weren't available for my mother. Until then, becoming a poet was no longer the sole territory of white people from the northeast United States or Europe.

All this is the context of . . . Horses, what the horses mean, a kind of love, brought together despite an opposition of culture, of place and time.

The poet cannot be separated from place. Even placelessness becomes a place. The world of conjecture, scholarship, and philosophical discourse is a place or series of places, based on land and how one lives off that land. The collaboration with the astronomer and photographer Stephen Strom, *Secrets from the Center of the World*, is a tribute to a land, a people, to particular stars and heavenly bodies who are part of that land, the history, myth, and shape of it. I believe Strom's study of the birth of stars has much to do with his photographic vision; there's a depth measured by light-years rather than miles, in the tender rendering of his photographs.

My journey on this earth in this life is marked by a path of red earth that leads from the mounds at Ocmulgee in what is now known as Georgia, to The Battle of Horsehoe Bend site at a curve in the Talapoosa River in now-Alabama, to the Mvskoke Creek Nation in now-Oklahoma, to the grounds of Indian school in now-New Mexico, and since that collection has taken me to the red earth of O'ahu. It makes a distinct path. It is the color of blood, it is the color of a collection of stars, it is the color of life, of breath. And, as anything in life that is a vital part of us, it needs to be fed with songs, poems; it needs to be remembered, hence, this collection of poetic prose and photographs.

This earth asks for so little from us human beings.

It was a fall day in Tempe. This meant a particular smell on the breeze, the Sun heading to a more northern elliptic. The children had gone to school and I sat outside facing east, with a terrible restlessness. I was in the presence of the Sun, a higher being than us small humans,