

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



These Poems

These poems
they are things that I do
in the dark
reaching for you
whoever you are
and
are you ready?

These words
they are stones in the water
running away

These skeletal lines
they are desperate arms for my longing and love.

I am a stranger
learning to worship the strangers
around me

whoever you are
whoever I may become.

June Jordan¹

Reflections

Reading this poem, you may not detect the political rage June Jordan is known for channeling. Social activist and self-proclaimed anarchist, Jordan was less interested in poetry as a vessel for beauty, and more concerned with poetry's platform as a medium for change. For her, there was little distinction in poetic and political rhetoric and she spent her career writing on behalf of the oppressed and marginalized, giving voice to the voiceless, and calling to action not only victims of injustice but *all* citizens desiring to make the world a better place.

What draws me to this poem in particular is its invitation, its openness ("are you ready?" the poem asks), its gentler rhetoric that seems to contrast with Jordan's more aggressive work. Though poetry and politics have long had a complicated marriage, the anxiety I find myself

¹ "These Poems" by June Jordan from *Things That I Do in the Dark*, Random House. Used by permission.

navigating these days—when our country feels divided and our civility seems to have disappeared—has heightened my awareness of what poetry is asked to do, what role it plays in civil discourse, and how my engagement with literature is (even subconsciously) inextricable from my engagement with the world. Poetry is as much a comfort as it is an instigator, a balm as well as a weapon; though my preference has been for calm, for salve, for delight, I am called lately to wonder if perhaps I have been neglecting poetry’s other responsibility: to protest, proclaim, condemn, denounce. It is an inspiring realization and a great privilege to acknowledge that the arts can do all of it, and—especially in the case of “These Poems”—can do it without sacrificing beauty for truth, or pleasure for anger.

Jordan’s poetry is largely autobiographical and often attempting to make sense of her experience as a black woman in a society that has regarded people of color with indifference, if not hostility. When my students used to ask, “Where are all the happy poems?” I answered, “They’re around. But we don’t always learn as much from them.” I wonder now if I was mistaken. Of course we learn from joy. Of course there is great wisdom in softness. And, to my mind, one of the highest orders for a poem is to say difficult things gently. Anne Lamott in her book *Bird by Bird* explains, “You don’t always have to chop with the sword of truth. You can point with it too.” I think “These Poems” is pointing, rather than chopping, and while it still suggests a tension between the “I” and the “you” (the poem is directly addressing an Other, “whoever you are,” Jordan repeats), the conflict is more interior than exterior, more resigned than antagonistic and “these words / they are stones in the water.”

I believe it is her restrained form illustrated here that most enriches Jordan’s body of work—its depth and breadth, its ability to look both outward and inward, and its capacity to reflect both the self and the world. If it is true that all poems are love poems (and I believe this is so), then Jordan’s work is a reminder that self-love is vital to healing. If the arts can help us think about worth, virtue, human need, the treatment of others, and the ways we participate (or fail to participate)—“in the dark / reaching for you”—in the nurturing of the human spirit, then this poem is doing essential work.

Are we not all, in our own ways and with our own language, writing poems in the dark?
Reaching with our “desperate arms”? Am I not also “a stranger / learning to worship the
strangers / around me”?

✧ About the Poet

June Jordan (1936-2002), was a Caribbean-American poet, playwright, essayist, editor, teacher, and activist who published more than two dozen books across a variety of genres. Known for her fierce commitment to human rights and her progressive political agenda, she used her work as a platform for discussing issues of race and immigration, gender and sexuality. The daughter of Jamaican immigrants, her voice endures as a global advocate for marginalized communities. She died of breast cancer at age 65.



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by Allison Seay, Associate for Religion and the Arts,
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