

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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



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.

Joy Harjo¹

¹ "Eagle Poem" by Joy Harjo from *In Mad Love and War*, Wesleyan University Press. Used by permission.

☞ Reflections

Many of Joy Harjo's poems are understood as tributes to humankind. To those in agony or despair, those who are voiceless or unseen, they often feel especially restorative, more anthem than cry, more praise than plea. Harjo is the current United States Poet Laureate, the first Native American to be appointed to that post. And while *Wellspring* has featured Harjo's work in previous editions, I thought it fitting to return to her now, during National Native American Heritage Month, and celebrate another of her poems, this one ever hopeful, one that's "swept our hearts clean with sacred wings."

The eagle—symbol of strength, grace, love, pride and bravery—is considered a most honored and sacred animal, connected to the divine, its feathers used for healing and in ceremony. In this poem the images of the natural world and its circles of motion come to mirror, or marry, the images of the inner world and our own "true circle," our breathing in and breathing out. As the eagle rounds a morning so we may round a life, "in beauty / in beauty."

Harjo writes elsewhere (in her collection titled *The Woman Who Fell from the Sky*), that "it is possible to understand the world from studying a leaf...the laws of aerodynamics, mathematics, poetry and biology through the complex beauty of such a perfect structure. It's also possible to travel the whole globe and learn nothing."

Perhaps I may take it even further and say that it is possible to understand something of the soul from studying the world, its smallest creatures and eagles alike. And possible, too, to have looked all my life all around me and everywhere for something that had been right here and on the inside forever, the "one whole voice..."

How revelatory and how profound it is for me that in drawing my attention inward it is also drawn skyward, that in careful listening to the inner voice I am actually listening more carefully to a voice beyond me.

☞ About the poet

Joy Harjo (b. 1951) was born in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and is a member of the Mvskoke Nation. A widely acclaimed poet, she is also an award-winning musician; in 2009 she won a Native American Music Award for Best Female Artist of the Year. She lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and much of her work is set there and in other areas of the American Southwest. Known for writing about the need for justice and compassion, particularly in her reclaiming the experiences and narratives of Native tradition, Harjo is an important voice in cultural and political discourse; she seeks to inspire a more peaceful future, one in which human beings are kinder, more responsible creatures. She is the 23rd United States Poet Laureate.



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