

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
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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, it was a necessarily blurry line that distinguished poetic from political rhetoric. She spent her career writing on behalf of the oppressed and marginalized, giving voice to the voiceless, and calling to action the human race, charged with nothing less than making the world a better place. What draws me to this poem in particular is its invitation, its openness with that relatively gentle question: "are you ready?" it asks.

Though poetry and politics have long had a complicated marriage, the anxiety I find myself navigating these days—when our country feels so divided and human pain so intense—has

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

heightened my awareness of what poetry is asked to do, what role it plays in civil discourse, and how my personal engagement with literature is (even subconsciously) inextricable from my engagement with the world. Poetry is as much a comfort as it is an instigator and language is a bandage as much as a weapon; though my preference (whose isn't?) is 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 mostly autobiographical and is often attempting to describe her experience as a black woman in a society that has for centuries largely regarded people of color with indifference, at best, if not abusive hostility. I am remembering what 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 tension 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 and that care-taking of the soul is inextricable from care-taking of the world. If the arts can help us think about worth, virtue, need, the treatment of others, the treatment of souls, and the ways we participate (or fail to participate) in the nurturing of the human spirit, then this poem is doing essential work and doing it “in the dark / reaching for you.”

Are we not all, in our own ways, in our own forms, and with our own languages, writing poems in the dark, trying somehow to put into an understandable shape all that feels beyond us? Reaching with our “desperate arms”? Am I not also “a stranger / learning to worship the strangers / around me”?

Yes, I am. May I have such an honor, whoever you are, and yes, I am ready.

✧ 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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