

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource

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from *A Map to the Next World*

You will see red cliffs. They are the heart, contain the ladder.

A white deer will greet you when the last human climbs from the destruction.

Remember the hole of shame marking the act of abandoning our tribal grounds.

We were never perfect.

Yet, the journey we make together is perfect on this earth who was once a star and made the same mistakes as humans.

We might make them again, she said.

Crucial to finding the way is this: there is no beginning or end.

You must make your own map.

Joy Harjo¹

Reflections

Much of Joy Harjo's work is concerned with reclaiming the experiences and narratives of Native tradition. She is cited as playing a pivotal role in what is called the Native American Renaissance of the late 20th century, a term coined to categorize the significant increase in production of literary works by Native Americans in the United States in the late 1960s. Often set in the American Southwest, Harjo's poems are frequently perceived as tributes to the voiceless, the dispossessed, and the forgotten. The excerpt here is from a longer poem that wrestles with identity, language, loss, and salvation.

"A Map to the Next World" inspires me to think at once about destruction and also protection. Harjo draws our attention earthward before she draws it skyward and that gesture feels profound, particularly for a piece that has as its task an impossibility: of course, there *is* no map to the next world, no way of knowing it beforehand, no explicit direction to

¹ "A Map to the Next World" by Joy Harjo from *How We Became Human: New and Selected Poems: 1975-2001*, W. W. Norton. Used by permission.

guide us other than what we have already available to us. In other words, it is as if Harjo instructs us to look first at what is *here* before we can pretend to know what is *there*. It is earthly beauty—the red cliffs, the deer, the tribal grounds—that sustains us, that contains the heart, that is our true instruction.

Harjo is known for writing about the need for justice and compassion and is an important voice in cultural and political discourse. One critic writes of the way she “resurrects the carnage” of long-standing conflict in order to inspire a more peaceful future. Her poetry also speaks to more universal concerns about responsibility, creation, and history. I read with interest a recent interview and was moved by her answer to a question about the voice of a marginalized people in the United States. In responding, she says, “[Native Americans have] been exiled and [have] disappeared in our own country.... I think we’re in a kind of exile. But maybe most Americans are in exile from where their spiritual core is, and they don’t know it. They wonder why they aren’t happy, why they’re confused, why they want to buy more.”

This idea that we might *all* be living in some kind of exile (from the Garden, from our mother’s womb, from God) and *all* attempting to reclaim what feels lost illuminates what I feel is poetry’s responsibility and its reward: an exploration of the depth and breadth of the human experience and a way to contemplate a relationship with the divine. The resolution of this poem—“You must make your own map”—affirms what we probably all know to be true: the journeys we are each called to make are uniquely and perfectly imperfect. I love what Henry James says, “We work in the dark. We do what we can. We give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art.”

✂ About the poet

Joy Harjo 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. Besides “A Map to the Next World,” my other favorite poem of hers is called “She Had Some Horses.” It ends like this:

She had some horses she loved.
She had some horses she hated.
These were the same horses.



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