Joy Harjo

How We Became Human

New and Selected Poems 1975-2001

Over a quarter-century's work from the 2003 winner of the Arrell Gibson Award for Lifetime Achievement.

This collection gathers poems from throughout Joy Harjo's twenty-eight-year career, beginning in 1973 in the age marked by the takeover at Wounded Knee and the rejuvenation of indigenous cultures in the world through poetry and music. How We Became Human explores its title question in poems of sustaining grace.

"Show[s] the remarkable progression of a writer determined to reconnect with her past and make sense of her present, drawing together the brutalities of contemporary reservation life with the beauty and sensibility of Native American culture and mythology....Alive with compassion, pain and love, this book is unquestionably an act of kindness."—Publishers Weekly

"I turn and return to Harjo's poetry for her breathtaking complex witness and for her world-remaking language."—Adrienne Rich

Joy Harjo belongs to the Muscogee Nation and is the author of six volumes of poetry. http://www.wwnorton.com/catalog/fall03/032534.htm

Eagle Poem

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.

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.
Morning Prayers

I have missed the guardian spirit of the Sangre de Cristos those mountains against which I destroyed myself every morning I was sick with loving and fighting in those small years. In that season I looked up to a blue conception of faith a notion of the sacred in the elegant border of cedar trees becoming mountain and sky.

This is how we were born into the world: Sky fell in love with earth, wore turquoise, cantered in on a black horse. Earth dressed herself fragrantly, with regard for the aesthetics of holy romance. Their love decorated the mountains with sunrise, weaved valleys delicate with the edging of sunset.

This morning I look toward the east and I am lonely for those mountains though I've said good-bye to the girl with her urgent prayers for redemption. I used to believe in a vision that would save the people carry us all to the top of the mountain during the flood of human destruction.

I know nothing anymore as I place my feet into the next world except this: the nothingness is vast and stunning, brims with details of steaming, dark coffee ashes of campfires the bells on yaks or sheep sirens careening through a deluge of humans or the dead carried through fire, through the mist of baking sweet bread and breathing.

This is how we will leave this world: on horses of sunrise and sunset from the shadow of the mountains who witnessed every battle every small struggle.

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