

BOOKS BY JOY HARJO

The Last Song (chapbook)

What Moon Drove Me to This?

She Had Some Horses

Secrets from the Center of the World

In Mad Love and War

Fishing (chapbook)

The Woman Who Fell from the Sky

Reinventing the Enemy's Language (co-editor)

MUSIC BY JOY HARJO

Letter from the End of the Twentieth Century

A Map to the Next World



P o e t r y a n d T a l e s

J o y H a r j o

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Instinct



In the dark I travel by instinct,
through the rubble of nightmares,
groaning of monsters toward the crack of light
along your body's horizon.
I roll over to my side, take you in my nostrils
test you for shape, intention and food
as nations fall apart.
Small winds tattoo my cheek.
Soon they will bring mist,
a small rain to clean the world
send rainbows to dress us,
for the ceremony
to rid us of the enemy mind.

when we were born we remembered everything



We are living in a system in which human worth is determined by money, material wealth, color of skin, religion and other capricious factors that do not tell the true value of a soul. This is an insane system. Those who profit from this system have also determined, by rationale and plundering, that the earth also has no soul, neither do the creatures, plants or other life forms matter. I call this system the *overculture*. There is no culture rooted here from the heart, or the need to sing. It is a system of buying and selling. Power is based on ownership of land, the work force, on the devaluation of life. The power centers are the multinational corporations who exploit many to profit a few. True power does not amass through the pain and suffering of others.

Phillip Deere, a spiritual leader from the Mvskoke, predicted the many twists and turns this path through the colonized world could take. He and others like him warned that this season will eventually pass, but not without great pain and suffering for everyone.

It's difficult to walk through the illusion without being awed and distracted by it. Power is seductive and sparkles. False gold also glitters. We think we know the difference, but it's easy to be seduced when all appearances tell you there is everything to be gained by winning.

At birth we know everything, can see into the shimmer of complexity. When a newborn looks at you it is with utter comprehension. We know where we are coming from, where we have been. And then we forget it all. That's why infants sleep so much after birth. It is an adjustment. The details of a new awareness have to be fine-tuned. But memory is elastic and nothing is ever forgotten. It's submerged below the bloodstream, in the river of memory informing us of direction, like a gyroscope in the heart of a ship. We are all headed to the same destination, eventually.

We who greet these arriving souls rejoice that the old ones have returned and will accompany us through the next cycle of the story.

A Map to the Next World



for Desiray Kierra Chee

I struggled and choked as I slid down the road through my mother. She was terrified, had no maternal instruction on birth. I wanted out as quickly as possible yet had serious doubts as to whether I wanted to take it on, a life that early on would run the jagged borders of despair and joy, so I went forwards and backwards, fought and nearly killed both of us as I came into this world, two months before my due date. I still battle impatience and the bad habit of struggle when there need be no fight.

I try to remember the beautiful sense of the pattern that was revealed before that first breath when the struggle in this colonized world threatens to destroy the gifts that my people carry into the world. But we cannot be destroyed. Destiny can be shifted by evil, but only for a little while.

In the last days of the fourth world I wished to make a map for those who would climb through the hole in the sky.

My only tools were the desires of humans as they emerged from the killing fields, from the bedrooms and the kitchens.

For the soul is a wanderer with many hands and feet.

The map must be of sand and can't be read by ordinary light. It must carry fire to the next tribal town, for renewal of spirit.

In the legend are instructions on the language of the land, how it was we forgot to acknowledge the gift, as if we were not in it or of it.

Take note of the proliferation of supermarkets and malls, the altars of money. They best describe the detour from grace.

Keep track of the errors of our forgetfulness; the fog steals our children while we sleep.

Flowers of rage spring up in the depression. Monsters are born there of nuclear anger.

Trees of ashes wave good-bye to good-bye and the map appears to disappear.

We no longer know the names of the birds here, how to speak to them by their personal names.

Once we knew everything in this lush promise.

What I am telling you is real and is printed in a warning on the map. Our forgetfulness stalks us, walks the earth behind us, leaving a trail of paper diapers, needles and wasted blood.

An imperfect map will have to do, little one.

The place of entry is the sea of your mother's blood, your father's small death as he longs to know himself in another.

There is no exit.

The map can be interpreted through the wall of the intestine—a spiral on the road of knowledge.

You will travel through the membrane of death, smell cooking from the encampment where our relatives make a feast of fresh deer meat and corn soup, in the Milky Way.

They have never left us; we abandoned them for science.

And when you take your next breath as we enter the fifth world there will be no X, no guidebook with words you can carry.

You will have to navigate by your mother's voice, renew the song she is singing.

Fresh courage glimmers from planets.

And lights the map printed with the blood of history, a map you will have to know by your intention, by the language of suns.

When you emerge note the tracks of the monster slayers where they entered the cities of artificial light and killed what was killing us.

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

White deer will come to greet you when the last human climbs from the destruction.

Remember the hole of our 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.

there is no such thing as a one-way land bridge



I imagine someone walking through the ruins of my house, years later when I am gone and anyone who knew me and my family and nation is gone and there are only stories as to what happened to us. Did we flee from an enemy, or die of famine or floods?

The story depends on who is telling it. A colonizer will say that the people disappeared, though their descendants are still living in the same area and they are going to school with their children. The descendants of the Anasazi are my granddaughters and will be their children and yet they are catalogued as “disappeared.” If it can be postulated that a people came to a natural end, that no one was there, the land was abandoned, then the colonizer will assume a right of ownership.

For years, predominant anthropological theory of the study of North American Indians was and still is the Bering Strait theory, that is, that North America was settled by a relatively late migration of peoples from Asia. This translated that prior rights of occupation was tentative, and made land claims of the indigenous peoples hold less weight, for if we were recent immigrants, too, then who are we to make claims?

The Bering Strait theory assumes that a land bridge was marked one way. The logic of that notion is so faulty as to be preposterous. There is no such thing as a one-way land bridge. People, creatures and other life will naturally travel back and forth. Just as we will naturally intermarry, travel up and down rivers, cross oceans, fly from Los Angeles to Oklahoma for a powwow.

The fault of that theory and so many others in the western world is that Indians are somehow less than human, or at least not as advanced as western European cultured humans. We are constantly being defined from the point of view of the colonizer. We are human and live complex and meaningful lives. I like the response given to an anthropologist when he asked a teacher in a particular Asian culture about ideology and theory. “What ideology? We just dance.”

When I am home in Oklahoma at the stomp grounds we may talk about the complexities of meaning, but to comprehend it, to know it intimately, the intricate context of history and family, is to dance it, to be it.

I think back to the ruins of a house in Chaco Canyon, Anasazi ruins near Crownpoint, New Mexico. The winds are cool and steady and through the years they have eroded the adobe. There is no protection from the sun and rain. Tourists quickly pass through ruins. The clouds, too, walk on. Everything keeps moving. Even me, moved by my thoughts through the house, through time. I converse with my own death, which will one day leave a track behind me, like the ruins of this house.

There was a woman here who was loved. She was good to look at because she was a quick and imaginative thinker. She liked the view of the peach orchard from the southern window, and loved the turquoise earrings that her mother had given her at her marriage. Her life mattered, utterly, to herself, to her children, to those she loved, to the birds she scattered crumbs to after the family had eaten. This was her house, and years later the house still remembered her, though it was almost gone and the woman’s spirit had flown to the other side.

PERHAPS THE WORLD ENDS HERE

The world begins at a kitchen table. No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teethe at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table.

This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.

From How We Became Human