

Lesson | We're Still Here: Indigenous Women Resistance and Resilience in the American Present

Joy Harjo Poetry

Enrichment Poems, Optional Content

Subject Area

Social Studies

Grade Level or Course

Grades 9–12

The Woman Hanging from the Thirteenth Floor Window

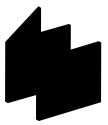
She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window. Her hands are pressed white against the concrete moulding of the tenement building. She hangs from the 13th floor window in east Chicago, with a swirl of birds over her head. They could be a halo, or a storm of glass waiting to crush her.

She thinks she will be set free.

The woman hanging from the 13th floor window on the east side of Chicago is not alone. She is a woman of children, of the baby, Carlos, and of Margaret, and of Jimmy who is the oldest. She is her mother's daughter and her father's son. She is several pieces between the two husbands she has had. She is all the women of the apartment building who stand watching her, watching themselves.

When she was young she ate wild rice on scraped down plates in warm wood rooms. It was in the farther north and she was the baby then. They rocked her.

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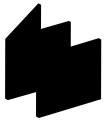
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She sees Lake Michigan lapping at the shores of herself. It is a dizzy hole of water and the rich live in tall glass houses at the edge of it. In some places Lake Michigan speaks softly, here, it just sputters and butts itself against the asphalt. She sees other buildings just like hers. She sees other women hanging from many-floored windows counting their lives in the palms of their hands and in the palms of their children's hands.

She is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window on the Indian side of town. Her belly is soft from her children's births, her worn levis swing down below her waist, and then her feet, and then her heart. She is dangling.

The woman hanging from the 13th floor hears voices. They come to her in the night when the lights have gone dim. Sometimes they are little cats mewling and scratching at the door, sometimes they are her grandmother's voice, and sometimes they are gigantic men of light whispering to her to get up, to get up, to get up. That's when she wants to have another child to hold onto in the night, to be able to fall back into dreams.

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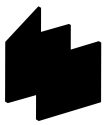
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And the woman hanging from the 13th floor window
hears other voices. Some of them scream out from below
for her to jump, they would push her over. Others cry softly
from the sidewalks, pull their children up like flowers and gather
them into their arms. They would help her, like themselves.

But she is the woman hanging from the 13th floor window,
and she knows she is hanging by her own fingers, her
own skin, her own thread of indecision.

She thinks of Carlos, of Margaret, of Jimmy.
She thinks of her father, and of her mother.
She thinks of all the women she has been, of all
the men. She thinks of the color of her skin, and
of Chicago streets, and of waterfalls and pines.
She thinks of moonlight nights, and of cool spring storms.
Her mind chatters like neon and northside bars.
She thinks of the 4 a.m. lonelineses that have folded
her up like death, discordant, without logical and
beautiful conclusion. Her teeth break off at the edges.
She would speak.

The woman hangs from the 13th floor window crying for
the lost beauty of her own life. She sees the
sun falling west over the grey plane of Chicago.
She thinks she remembers listening to her own life
break loose, as she falls from the 13th floor
window on the east side of Chicago, or as she
climbs back up to claim herself again.



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The Dawn Appears with Butterflies

You leave before daybreak to prepare your husband's body for burial at dawn. It is one of countless dawns since the first crack of consciousness, each buried in molecular memory, each as distinct as your face in the stew of human faces, your eyes blinking back force in the vortex of loss and heartbreak.

I put on another pot of coffee, watch out the kitchen window at the beginning of the world, follow your difficult journey to Flagstaff, through rocks that recall the scarlet promises of gods, their interminable journeys, and pine. Until I can no longer see, but continue to believe in the sun's promise to return. And it will this morning. And tomorrow. And the day after tomorrow, building the spiral called eternity out of each sun, the dance of butterflies evoking the emerging.

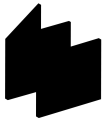
Two nights ago you drove north from the hospital at Flagstaff, after his abandonment to the grace we pursue as wild horses the wind. Your grief was the dark outlining the stars. One star in particular waved to you as you maneuvered in the nightmare of the myth of death. It broke loose, stammered, then flew marking the place between the star house of the gods and Third Mesa.

You laughed with the spirit of your husband who would toss stars! And your tears made a pale butterfly, the color of dawn which is the color of the sky of the next world, which isn't that far away. There is no tear in the pattern. It is perfect, as our gradual return to the maker of butterflies, or our laughter as we considered the joke of burying him in the shirt you always wanted him to wear, a shirt he hated.

Someone is singing in the village. And the sacredness of all previous dawns resonates. That is the power of the singer who respects the power of the place without words, which is as butterflies, returning to the sun, our star in the scheme of stars, of revolving worlds.

And within that the power of the dying is to know when to make that perfect leap into everything. We are all dying together, though there is nothing like that loneliness of being the first or the last, and we all take that place with each other.

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Then at dusk they share the fire that warms the world, and sit together remembering everything, recounting the matrix of allies and enemies, of sons and daughters, of lovers and lovers, each molecule of the sky and earth an explosion of memory within us.

In this fierce drama of everything we are at this juncture of our linked journey to the Milky Way, as your babies stir in bittersweet dreams while you travel to your most difficult good-bye, as Grandma lies down with them to comfort them, as your father's truck starts down the road in the village, as a dog barks, everything is a prayer for this journey. As you shut the door behind you in the dark:

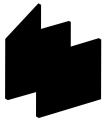
Wings of dusk

Wings of night sky

Wings of dawn

Wings of morning light

It is sunrise now.



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The Myth of Blackbirds

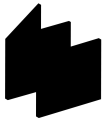
Vocal recording by the University of Arizona

The hours we counted precious were blackbirds in the density of Washington.
Taxis toured the labyrinth with passengers of mist as the myth of ancient
love took the shape of two figures carrying the dawn tenderly on their
shoulders to the shores of the Potomac.

We fled the drama of lit marble in the capitol for a refuge held up by sweet,
everlasting earth. The man from Ghana who wheeled our bags was lonesome
for his homeland, but commerce made it necessary to carry someone else's
burdens. The stars told me how to find us in this disorder of systems.
Washington did not ever sleep that night in the sequence of eternal nights.
There were whirring calculators, computers stealing names, while spirits
of the disappeared drank coffee at an all-night cafe in this city of disturbed
relativity.

Justice is a story by heart in the beloved country where imagination weeps.
The sacred mountains only appear to be asleep. When we finally found the
room in the hall of mirrors and shut the door I could no longer bear the
beauty of scarlet licked with yellow on the wings of blackbirds.
This is the world in which we undressed together. Within it white deer
intersect with the wisdom of the hunter of grace. Horses wheel toward the
morning star. Memory was always more than paper and cannot be broken by
violent history or stolen by thieves of childhood. We cannot be separated in
the loop of mystery between blackbirds and the memory of blackbirds.

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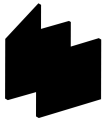
And in the predawn when we had slept for centuries in a drenching sweet rain you touched me and the springs of clear water beneath my skin were new knowledge. And I loved you in this city of death.

Through the darkness in the sheer rise of clipped green grass and asphalt our ancestors appear together at the shoreline of the Potomac in their moccasins and pressed suits of discreet armor. They go to the water from the cars of smoky trains, or dismount from horses dusty with fatigue.

See the children who became our grandparents, the old women whose bones fertilized the corn. They form us in our sleep of exhaustion as we make our way through this world of skewed justice, of songs without singers.

I embrace these spirits of relatives who always return to the place of power, whatever the outcome in the spiral of beauty. And I particularly admire the tender construction of your spine which in the gentle dawning is a ladder between the deep in which stars are perfectly stars, and the heavens where we converse with eagles.

I guide your hip home to me with my hand which is more than a hand, rather a river of effervescent water. And I am thankful to the brutal city for the space which outlines your limber beauty. To the man from Ghana who loves the poetry of the stars. To the ancestors who do not forget us in the concrete and paper illusion. To the blackbirds who are more than blackbirds. And to you, sweetheart, as we make our incredible journey.



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A Map to the Next World

for Desiray Kierra Chee

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.

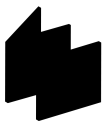
Take note of the proliferation of supermarkets and malls, the
altars of money. They best describe the detour from grace.

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.

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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.

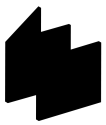
The map can be interpreted through the wall of the intestine—a spiral on the road of knowledge.

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.

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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.

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.