

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

Joy Harjo Poetry

Subject Area

Social Studies

Grade Level or Course

Grades 9–12

The Path to the Milky Way Leads through Los Angeles

There are strangers above me, below me and all around me and we are all
strange in this place of recent invention.

This city named for angels appears naked and stripped of anything resembling
the shaking of turtle shells, the songs of human voices on a summer night
outside Okmulgee.

Yet, it's perpetually summer here, and beautiful. The shimmer of gods is
easier to perceive at sunrise or dusk,
when those who remember us here in the illusion of the marketplace
turn toward the changing of the sun and say our names.

We matter to somebody,

We must matter to the strange god who imagines us as we revolve together
ain the dark sky on the path to the Milky Way.

We can't easily see that starry road from the perspective of the crossing of
boulevards, can't hear it in the whine of civilization or taste the minerals of
planets in hamburgers.

But we can buy a map here of the stars' homes, dial a tone for dangerous love,
choose from several brands of water, or a hiss of oxygen for gentle
rejuvenation.

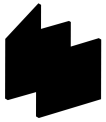
Everyone knows you can't buy love but you can still sell your soul for less
than a song, to a stranger who will sell it to someone else for a profit until
you're owned by a company of strangers in the city of the strange
and getting stranger.

I'd rather understand how to sing from a crow who was never good at singing
or much of anything but finding gold in the trash of humans.

So what are we doing here I ask the crow parading on the ledge of falling that
hangs over this precarious city?

Crow just laughs and says wait, wait and see and I am waiting and not seeing
anything, not just yet.

But like crow I collect the shine of anything beautiful I can find.



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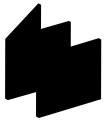
Social Studies

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Fire

a woman can't survive
by her own breath
alone
she must know
the voices of mountains
she must recognize
the foreverness of blue sky
she must flow
with the elusive
bodies
of night winds
who will take her
into herself
look at me
i am not a separate woman
i am a continuance
of blue sky
i am the throat
of the mountains
a night wind
who burns
with every breath
she takes



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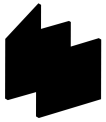
For Alva Benson, And For Those Who Have Learned To Speak

And the ground spoke when she was born.
Her mother heard it. In Navajo she answered
as she squatted down against the earth
to give birth. It was now when it happened,
now giving birth to itself again and again
between the legs of women.

Or maybe it was the Indian Hospital
in Gallup. The ground still spoke beneath
mortar and concrete. She strained against the
metal stirrups, and they tied her hands down
because she still spoke with them when they
muffled her screams. But her body went on
talking and the child was born into their
hands, and the child learned to speak
both voices.

She grew up talking in Navajo, in English
and watched the earth around her shift and change
with the people in the towns and in the cities
learning not to hear the ground as it spun around
beneath them. She learned to speak for the ground
the voice coming through her like roots that
have long hungered for water. Her own daughter
was born, like she had been, in either place
or all places, so she could leave, leap
into the sound she had always heard,
a voice like water, like the gods weaving
against sundown in a scarlet light.

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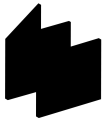
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For Alva Benson, And For Those Who Have Learned To Speak

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The child now hears names in her sleep.
They change into other names, and into others.
It is the ground murmuring, and Mt. St. Helens
erupts as the harmonic motion of a child turning
inside her mother's belly waiting to be born
to begin another time.
And we go on, keep giving birth and watch
ourselves die, over and over.
And the ground spinning beneath us
goes on talking.



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In Praise of Earth

We kept on dancing last summer though the dancing had been called subversive.
We weren't alone at the end of this particular world and knew
it wouldn't be the last world, though wars
had broken out on all sides.

We kept on dancing and with us were the insects who had gathered at the grounds
in the grasses and the trees. And with us were the stars and
a few lone planets who had been friends
with the earth for generations.

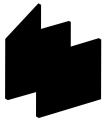
With us were the spirits who wished to honor this beloved earth in any beautiful
manner. And with us at dawn was the Sun who took the lead
and then we broke for camp, for stickball
and breakfast.

We all needed praise made of the heart's tattoo as it inspired our feet or wings,
someone to admire us despite our tendency to war, to terrible
stumbles. So does the red cliff who is the heart
broken to the sky.

So do the stones who were the first to speak when we arrived. So does the flaming
mountain who harbors the guardian spirits who refuse to abandon
us. And this Earth keeps faithfully to her journey, carrying us
around the Sun,

All of us in our rags and riches, our rages and promises, small talk and suffering.
As we go to the store to buy our food and forget to plant, sing so
that we will be nourished in turn. As we walk out
into the dawn,

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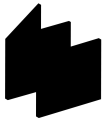
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With our lists of desires that her gifts will fulfill, as she turns our tears
into rivers of sweet water, we spiral between dusking and
dawn, wake up and sleep in this lush palace of creation,
rooted by blood, dreams, and history.

We are linked by leaf, fin, and root. When we climb through the sky to each
new day our thoughts are clouds shifting weather within us.
When we step out of our minds into ceremonial
language we are humbled and amazed,

at the sacrifice. Those who forget become the people of stone who guard
the entrance to remembering. And the Earth keeps up her
dancing and she is neither perfect nor exactly in time.
She is one of us.

And she loves the dance for what it is. So does the Sun who calls the Earth
beloved. And praises her with light.



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She Had Some Horses

She had some horses.

She had horses who were bodies of sand.
She had horses who were maps drawn of blood.
She had horses who were skins of ocean water.
She had horses who were the blue air of sky.
She had horses who were fur and teeth.
She had horses who were clay and would break.
She had horses who were splintered red cliff.

She had some horses.

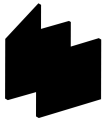
She had horses with long, pointed breasts.
She had horses with full, brown thighs.
She had horses who laughed too much.
She had horses who threw rocks at glass houses.
She had horses who licked razor blades.

She had some horses.

She had horses who danced in their mothers' arms.
She had horses who thought they were the sun and
their bodies shone and burned like stars.
She had horses who waltzed nightly on the moon.
She had horses who were much too shy, and kept quiet
in stalls of their own making.

She had some horses.

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She Had Some Horses

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She had horses who liked Creek Stomp Dance songs.
She had horses who cried in their beer.
She had horses who spit at male queens who made
them afraid of themselves.
She had horses who said they weren't afraid.
She had horses who lied.
She had horses who told the truth, who were stripped
bare of their tongues.

She had some horses.

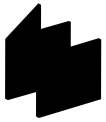
She had horses who called themselves, "horse."
She had horses who called themselves, "spirit." and kept
their voices secret and to themselves.
She had horses who had no names.
She had horses who had books of names.

She had some horses.

She had horses who whispered in the dark, who were afraid to speak.
She had horses who screamed out of fear of the silence, who
carried knives to protect themselves from ghosts.
She had horses who waited for destruction.
She had horses who waited for resurrection.

She had some horses.

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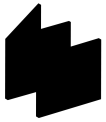
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She had horses who got down on their knees for any savior.
She had horses who thought their high price had saved them.
She had horses who tried to save her, who climbed in her
bed at night and prayed as they raped her.

She had some horses.

She had some horses she loved.
She had some horses she hated.

These were the same horses.



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The Place the Musician Became a Bear on the Streets of a City Meant to Kill Him

for Jim Pepper

I think of the lush stillness of the end of a world, sung into place by singers and the rattle of turtles
in the dark morning.

When embers from the sacred middle are climbing out the other side of stars.

When the moon has stompdanced with us from one horizon to the next, such a soft awakening.

Our souls imitate lights in the Milky Way. We've always known where to go to become ourselves again
in the human comedy.

It's the how that baffles. A saxophone can complicate things.

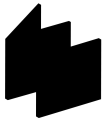
You knew this, as do all musicians when the walk becomes a necessary dance to fuel the fool heart.

Or the single complicated human becomes a wave of humanness and forgets to be ashamed of making
the wrong step.

I'm talking about an early morning in Brooklyn, the streets the color of ashes, do you see the connection?

It's not as if the stars forsake us. We forget about them. Or remake the pattern in a field of white crystal
or of some other tricky fate.

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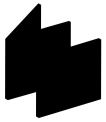
We never mistook ourselves for anything but human.

The wings of the Milky Way lead back to the singers. And there's the saxophone again.

It's about rearranging the song to include the subway hiss under your feet in Brooklyn.

And the laugh of a Bear who thought he was a human.

As he plays that tune again, the one about the wobble of the earth spinning so damned hard it hurts.



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Anchorage

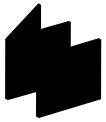
for Audre Lorde

This city is made of stone, of blood, and fish.
There are Chugatch Mountains to the east
and whale and seal to the west.
It hasn't always been this way, because glaciers
who are ice ghosts create oceans, carve earth
and shape this city here, by the sound.
They swim backwards in time.

Once a storm of boiling earth cracked open
the streets, threw open the town.
It's quiet now, but underneath the concrete
is the cooking earth,
 and above that, air
which is another ocean, where spirits we can't see
are dancing joking getting full
on roasted caribou, and the praying
goes on, extends out.

Nora and I go walking down 4th Avenue
and know it is all happening.
On a park bench we see someone's Athabascan

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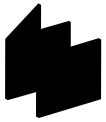
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grandmother, folded up, smelling like 200 years
of blood and piss, her eyes closed against some
unimagined darkness, where she is buried in an ache
in which nothing makes
sense.

We keep on breathing, walking, but softer now,
the clouds whirling in the air above us.
What can we say that would make us understand
better than we do already?
Except to speak of her home and claim her
as our own history, and know that our dreams
don't end here, two blocks away from the ocean
where our hearts still batter away at the muddy shore.

And I think of the 6th Avenue jail, of mostly Native
and Black men, where Henry told about being shot at
eight times outside a liquor store in L.A., but when
the car sped away he was surprised he was alive,
no bullet holes, man, and eight cartridges strewn
on the sidewalk
all around him.

Everyone laughed at the impossibility of it,
but also the truth. Because who would believe
the fantastic and terrible story of all of our survival
those who were never meant
to survive?



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Protocol

THE SONG VERSION

Spoken

I do not know your language though I hear the breaking of waves through the years.
It is blue and if I am to follow protocol I will introduce myself
and in that you might know that I did not find myself
here on your island by some coincidence.

Sung

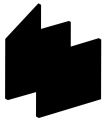
When we emerged from that misty original place
we were led by four young winds, and a star who took the form
of talking fire. After we set up camp some of us went to look for water.

I found it years later, near the scarlet volcano just as it was predicted,
when companies of white men have fooled themselves and the sleeping
ones into thinking they've bought the world.

My family still has the iron cooking pot that was traded to us
when treaties were forced with blood. Those who signed were killed.
Now I have a gas range and there is no end to the war.

When I arrive from the sky after traveling through clouds,
and the afterburn of jets I will consider the gift
of those who kept walking though their feet were bloodied
with cold and distance, as their houses and beloved lands
were burned behind them.

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Sung

I will consider the tyranny
of false rulers and how though they appear to dominate
your island they are small and brittle and will break.

When we meet in the beginning place, you honor me with pikake and maile
and a chant that allows me to paddle with you into the waters
so I will not be known as a stranger.

I offer you coral and tobacco and a song that will make us vulnerable
to the shimmer of the heart. It allows us to walk the roots
with our peoples through any adversity to sunrise.

Chorus

Translate to Hawaiin

This is how I know myself.

This is how I know who you are.

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