

**POEMS BY JOY HARJO**

*Translated into English by Andrea Echeverría y Juan G. Sánchez Martínez*

**For Calling The Spirit Back  
From Wandering The Earth  
In Its Human Feet**

Put down that bag of potato chips, that white bread, that bottle of pop.  
Turn off that cellphone, computer, and remote control.  
Open the door, then close it behind you.  
Take a breath offered by friendly winds. They travel  
the earth gathering essences of plants to clean.  
Give back with gratitude.  
If you sing it will give your spirit lift to fly to the stars' ears and back.  
Acknowledge this earth who has cared for you since you were  
a dream planting itself precisely within your parents' desire.  
Let your moccasin feet take you to the encampment of the  
guardians who have known you before time, who will be there after time.  
They sit before the fire that has been there without time.  
Let the earth stabilize your postcolonial insecure jitters.  
Be respectful of the small insects, birds and animal people who accompany you.  
Ask their forgiveness for the harm we humans have brought down upon them.  
Don't worry.  
The heart knows the way though there may be high-rises,  
interstates, checkpoints, armed soldiers, massacres, wars, and  
those who will despise you because they despise themselves.  
The journey might take you a few hours, a day, a year, a few  
years, a hundred, a thousand or even more.  
Watch your mind. Without training it might run away and  
leave your heart for the immense human feast set by the thieves of time.  
Do not hold regrets.  
When you find your way to the circle, to the fire kept burning  
by the keepers of your soul, you will be welcomed.  
You must clean yourself with cedar, sage, or other healing plant.  
Cut the ties you have to failure and shame.  
Let go the pain you are holding in your mind,  
your shoulders, your heart, all the way to your feet.  
Let go the pain of your ancestors to make way  
for those who are heading in our direction.  
Ask for forgiveness. Call upon the help of those who love you.  
These helpers take many forms: animal,  
element, bird, angel, saint, stone, or ancestor.  
Call yourself back. You will find yourself caught  
in corners and creases of shame, judgment, and human abuse.  
You must call in a way that your spirit will want to return.  
Speak to it as you would to a beloved child.  
Welcome your spirit back from its wandering. It will return  
in pieces, in tatters. Gather them together.  
They will be happy to be found after being lost for so long.  
Your spirit will need to sleep awhile after it is bathed and given clean clothes.  
Now you can have a party. Invite everyone you know who  
loves and supports you. Keep room for those who have no place else to go.  
Make a giveaway, and remember, keep the speeches short.  
Then, you must do this: help the next person find their way through the dark.

## **Rabbit Is Up to Tricks**

In a world long before this one, there was enough for everyone,  
Until somebody got out of line.  
We heard it was Rabbit, fooling around  
with clay and the wind.  
Everybody was tired of his tricks and no one would play with him;  
He was lonely in this world.  
So Rabbit thought to make a person.  
And when he blew into the mouth of that crude figure to see  
What would happen,  
The clay man stood up.  
Rabbit showed the clay man how to steal a chicken.  
The clay man obeyed.  
Then Rabbit showed him how to steal corn.  
The clay man obeyed.  
Then he showed him how to steal someone else's wife.  
The clay man obeyed.  
Rabbit felt important and powerful.  
The clay man felt important and powerful.  
And once that clay man started he could not stop.  
Once he took that chicken he wanted all the chickens.  
And once he took that corn he wanted all the corn.  
And once he took that wife, he wanted all the wives.  
He was insatiable.  
Then he had a taste of gold and he wanted all the gold.  
Then it was land and anything else he saw.  
His wanting only made him want more.  
Soon it was countries, and then it was trade.  
The wanting infected the earth.  
We lost track of the purpose and reason for life.  
We began to forget our songs. We forgot our stories.  
We could no longer see or hear our ancestors,  
Or talk with each other across the kitchen table.  
Forests were being mowed down all over the world.  
And Rabbit had no place to play.  
Rabbit's trick had backfired.  
Rabbit tried to call the clay man back,  
But when the clay man wouldn't listen  
Rabbit realized he'd made a clay man with no ears.

## In Mystic

My path is a cross of burning trees,  
Lit by crows carrying fire in their beaks.  
I ask the guardians of these lands for permission to enter.  
I am a visitor to this history.  
No one remembers to ask anymore, they answer.  
What do I expect in this New England seaport town, near  
the birthplace of democracy,  
Where I am a ghost?  
Even a casino can't make an Indian real.  
Or should I say "native," or "savage," or "demon"?  
And with what trade language?  
I am trading a backwards look for jeopardy.  
I agree with the ancient European maps.  
There are monsters beyond imagination that troll the waters.  
The Puritan's determined ships did fall off the edge of the world . . .  
I am happy to smell the sea,  
Walk the narrow winding streets of shops and restaurants,  
and delight in the company of friends, trees, and small winds.  
I would rather not speak with history but history came to me.  
It was dark before daybreak when the fire sparked.  
The men left on a hunt from the Pequot village here where I stand.  
The women and children left behind were set afire.  
I do not want to know this, but my gut knows the language of bloodshed.  
Over six hundred were killed, to establish a home for God's  
people, crowded the Puritan leaders in their Sunday sermons.  
And then history was gone in a betrayal of smoke.  
There is still burning though we live in a democracy erected  
over the burial ground.  
This was given to me to speak.  
Every poem is an effort at ceremony.  
I asked for a way in.

(For Pam Uschuk) October 31, 2009

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### **Once the World Was Perfect \***

Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.  
Then we took it for granted.  
Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind.  
Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head.  
And once Doubt ruptured the web,  
All manner of demon thoughts  
Jumped through—  
We destroyed the world we had been given  
For inspiration, for life—  
Each stone of jealousy, each stone  
Of fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.  
No one was without a stone in his or her hand.  
There we were,  
Right back where we had started.  
We were bumping into each other  
In the dark.  
And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know  
How to live with each other.  
Then one of the stumbling ones took pity on another  
And shared a blanket.  
A spark of kindness made a light.  
The light made an opening in the darkness.  
Everyone worked together to make a ladder.  
A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world,  
And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children,  
And their children, all the way through time—  
To now, into this morning light to you.

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\* Listen the poem read by the author in the *Poetry Foundation* site: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/podcasts/142661/once-the-world-was-perfect>

## Talking with the Sun

I believe in the sun.  
In the tangle of human failures of fear, greed, and  
forgetfulness, the sun gives me clarity.  
When explorers first encountered my people, they called us  
heathens, sun worshippers.  
They didn't understand that the sun is a relative, and  
illuminates our path on this earth.  
After dancing all night in a circle we realize that we are a part of a larger sense of stars and planets dancing with us overhead.  
When the sun rises at the apex of the ceremony, we are renewed.  
There is no mistaking this connection, though Walmart might be just down the road.  
Humans are vulnerable and rely on the kindnesses of the earth and the sun;  
we exist together in a sacred field of meaning.  
Our earth is shifting. We can all see it.  
I hear from my Inuit and Yupik relatives up north that  
everything has changed. It's so hot; there is not enough winter.  
Animals are confused. Ice is melting.  
The quantum physicists have it right; they are beginning to think like Indians:  
everything is connected dynamically at an intimate level.  
When you remember this, then the current wobble of the earth makes sense.  
How much more oil can be drained,  
Without replacement; without reciprocity?  
I walked out of a hotel room just off Times Square at dawn to find the sun.  
It was the fourth morning since the birth of my fourth granddaughter.  
This was the morning I was to present her to the sun, as a relative, as one of us.  
It was still dark, overcast as I walked through Times Square.  
I stood beneath a twenty-first century totem pole of symbols of multinational corporations,  
made of flash and neon.  
The sun rose up over the city but I couldn't see it amidst the rain.  
Though I was not at home, bundling up the baby to carry her outside,  
I carried this newborn girl within the cradleboard of my heart.  
I held her up and presented her to the sun, so she would be recognized as a relative,  
So that she won't forget this connection, this promise, So that we all remember, the sacredness of life.

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## **Suicide Watch**

1.

I was on a train stopped sporadically at checkpoints.  
What tribe are you, what nation, what race, what sex, what unworthy soul?

2.

I could not sleep, because I could not wake up.  
No mirror could give me back what I wanted.

3.

I was given a drug to help me sleep.  
Then another drug to wake up.  
Then a drug was given to me to make me happy.  
They all made me sadder.

4.

Death will gamble with anyone.  
There are many fools down here who believe they will win.

5.

You know, said my teacher, you can continue to wallow, or  
You can stand up here with me in the sunlight and watch the battle.

6.

I sat across from a girl whose illness wanted to jump over to me.  
No! I said, but not aloud.  
I would have been taken for crazy.

7.

We will always become those we have ever judged or condemned.

8.

This is not mine. It belongs to the soldiers who raped the young women on the Trail of Tears. It belongs to Andrew Jackson. It belongs to the missionaries. It belongs to the thieves of our language. It belongs to the Bureau of Indian Affairs. It no longer belongs to me.

9.

I became fascinated by the dance of dragonflies over the river.  
I found myself first there.

## You Can Change the Story, My Spirit Said to Me as I Sat Near the Sea

For Sharon Oard Warner and DG Nanouk Okpik

I am in a village up north, in the lands named "Alaska" now. These places had their own names long before English, Russian, or any other politically imposed trade language.

It is in the times when people dreamed and thought together as one being. That doesn't mean there weren't individuals. In those times, people were more individual in personhood than they are now in their common assertion of individuality: one person kept residence on the moon even while living in the village. Another was a man who dressed up and lived as a woman and was known as the best seamstress. I have traveled to this village with a close friend who is also a distant relative. We are related to nearly everyone by marriage, clan, or blood.

The first night after our arrival, a woman is brutally killed in the village. Murder is not commonplace. The evil of it puts the whole village at risk. It has to be dealt with immediately so that the turbulence will not leave the people open to more evil.

Because my friend and I are the most obvious influence, it

is decided that we are to be killed, to satisfy the murder, to ensure the village will continue in a harmonious manner. No one tells us we are going to be killed. We know it; my bones know it. It is unfortunate, but it is how things must be.

The next morning, my friend and I have walked down from the village to help gather, when we hear the killing committee coming for us. I can hear them behind us, with their implements and stones, in their psychic roar of purpose.

I know they are going to kill us. I thank the body that has been my clothing on this journey. It has served me well for protection and enjoyment. I hear—I still hear—the crunch of bones as the village mob, sent to do this job, slams us violently. It's not personal for most of them. A few gain pleasure. I feel my body's confused and terrible protest, then my spirit leaps out above the scene and I watch briefly before circling toward the sea. I linger out over the sea, and my soul's helper who has been with me through the stories of my being says, "You can go back and change the story."

My first thought was, *Why would I want to do that? I am free of the needs of earth existence. I can move like wind and water.* But then, because I am human, not bird or whale, I feel compelled.

"What do you mean, 'change the story'?"

Then I am back in the clothes of my body outside the village. I am back in the time between the killing in the village and my certain death in retribution. "Now what am I supposed to do?" I ask my Spirit. I can see no other way to proceed through the story.

My Spirit responds, "You know what to do. Look, and you will see the story."

And then I am alone with the sea and the sky. I give my thinking to time and let them go play.

It is then I see. I see a man in the village stalk a woman. She is not interested in him, but he won't let go. He stalks her as he stalks a walrus. He is the village's best hunter of walrus. He stalks her to her home, and when no one else is there, he trusses her as if she were a walrus, kills her and drags her body out of her house to the sea. I can see the trail of blood behind them. I can see his footprints in blood as he returns to the village alone.

I am in the village with my friend. The people are gathering and talking about the killing. I can feel their nudges toward my friend and I. I stand up with a drum in my hand. I say: "I have a story I want to tell you."

And then I begin drumming and dancing to accompany the story. It is pleasing, and the people want to hear more.

They want to hear what kind of story I am bringing from my village.

I sing, dance, and tell the story of a walrus hunter. He is the best walrus hunter of a village. I sing about his relationship to the walrus, and how he has fed his people. And how skilled he is as he walks out onto the ice to call out the walrus.

And then I tell the story of the killing of a walrus who is like a woman. I talk about the qualities of the woman, whom the man sees as a walrus. By now, the story has its own spirit that wants to live. It dances and sings and breathes. It surprises me with what it knows. With the last step, the last hit of the drum, the killer stands up, as if to flee the gathering. The people turn together as one and see him. They see that he has killed the woman, and it is his life that must be taken to satisfy the murder.

When I return to present earth time, I can still hear the singing.

I get up from my bed and dance and sing the story.

It is still in my tongue, my body, as if it has lived there all along,

though I am in a city with many streams of peoples from far and wide across the earth.

We make a jumble of stories. We do not dream together.

## Morning prayers

I have missed the guardian spirit  
of 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 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.



### **This land is a poem**

This land is a poem of ochre and burnt sand I could never write, unless paper were the sacrament of sky, and ink the broken line of wild horses staggering the horizon several miles away. Even then, does anything written ever matter to the earth, wind, and sky?

### **Anything that matters**

Anything that matters is here. Anything that will continue to matter in the next several thousand years will continue to be here. Approaching in the distance is the child you were some years ago. See her laughing as she chases a white butterfly.

### **Don't bother the earth spirit**

Don't bother the earth spirit who lives here. She is working on a story. It is the oldest story in the world and it is delicate, changing. If she sees you watching she will invite you in for coffee, give you warm bread, and you will be obligated to stay and listen. But this is no ordinary story. You will have to endure earthquakes, lightning, the deaths of all you love, the most blinding beauty. It's a story so compelling you may never want to leave; this is how she traps you. See the stone finger over there? That is the only one who ever escaped.

### **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

### 13 Poems by Joy Harjo : ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The work of Joy Harjo (Mvskoke, Tulsa, Oklahoma) challenges every attempt at introduction. Singer, saxophonist, poet, performer, dramatist, and storyteller are just a few of her roles. Somewhere between jazz and ceremonial flute, the beat of her sensibility radiates hope and gratitude to readers and listeners alike. For example, from Harjo we learn that the opposite of love is not hate, but fear. Several of her books, such as *How We Became Human*, *The Woman Who Fell From the Sky*, and *She Had Some Horses* are now classics in both English and World Indigenous Literature. Harjo has recorded five original albums, including the outstanding *Winding Through the Milky Way* with which she won the 2009 Native American Music Award (NAMMY) for Best Woman Artist of the Year. The first 8 poems in this selection are from her book, *Conflict Resolution from Holy Beings* (2015). The remaining 5 poems are from earlier works and have not been previously translated into Spanish. We are grateful to the poet for allowing us to translate her work here. (Andrea Echeverría y Juan G. Sánchez Martínez)

### ABOUT THE TRANSLATORS

Andrea Echeverría is an Assistant Professor at Wake Forest University. She has published a book on the work of two Peruvian poets titled *El despertar de los awquis: migración y utopía en la poesía de Boris Espezúa y Gloria Mendoza* (Paracaídas Editores & UNMSM, 2016), and several articles on Mapuche poetry, ritual and memory. She is currently working on a book project on contemporary Mapuche poetry and visual arts.

Juan G. Sánchez Martínez is originally from the Andes (Bakatá, Colombia). He dedicates both his creative and scholarly writing to indigenous cultural expression and ancestral ways of being. His book, *Altamar*, was awarded the 2016 National Prize for Literature in the area of Poetry, *Universidad de Antioquia*, Colombia. *Altamar* is a tribute to the grandfathers and grandmothers, activists and writers who have protected, with their own lives, the pure water of their territories. Since 2016, he works as an Assistant Professor at the University of North Carolina Asheville, in the Departments of Languages and Literatures and Indigenous Studies.